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# Governing Migration and Asylum Amid Covid-19 and Legal Precarity in Turkey

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## Abstract

Legal status and associated rights to access state services become even more important at times of crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. By reviewing legal amendments, central government and municipalities' policies and policymakers' statements, this article examines the example of Turkey, which is home to around 4 million undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. The Turkish state-provided Covid-19 treatment in the 'emergency' scope of healthcare for all residents irrespective of their legal status. However, structural problems left undocumented migrants and refugees faced with three significant obstacles. These obstacles were the requirement to test positive for Covid-19; the requirement to access primary healthcare to be referred to hospitals and to reside in the city of registration to access that primary healthcare; and the fear of losing employment, being evicted from housing or being deported by the authorities. Additionally, growing political uncertainty and a deteriorating economic situation have contributed to growing anti-migrant movements in the country. Not only have undocumented migrants and refugees had limited access to public health provisions, but they were also at greater risk of being considered to be a threat to public health and public security. The article concludes by showing that legal precarity brings even more vulnerability at times of crisis and by suggesting future areas of research.

## Keywords

governance – migration – asylum – refugees – legal precarity – access to health – Turkey

## Introduction

As in many parts of the world, in Turkey, those who suffered from Covid-19 illness (and the effects of lockdowns) have disproportionately been the urban population in lower-income households. Among these, undocumented migrants and refugees constitute one of the highest risk groups due to their working and housing conditions and limited access to healthcare. As the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, Turkey is home to more than 3.7 million Syrians under temporary protection and several hundred thousand asylum seekers and refugees under international protection.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a substantial number of undocumented migrants live in the country. The Covid-19 pandemic has made it clear that each member of society, regardless of their legal status, is important for public health. The challenge facing the country is how to protect undocumented migrants and refugees.<sup>2</sup>

This article examines this issue by reviewing legal amendments, central government and municipalities' policies and policymakers' statements, some of which seem to have paralleled and contributed to growing hatred towards migrants in the country. The pandemic occurred in Turkey at a time when the government was using undocumented migrants and refugees as a bargaining tool with the European Union (EU) in return for its support for Turkey's geopolitical aims in northern Syria. With the arrival of the pandemic, the government's plans fell through. Nonetheless, it acted quickly to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Curfews were introduced for evenings and weekends. Those below 20 and over 65 were banned from going outside, leaving many unable to go to school, continue their employment, or look for new jobs. Though helpful in limiting the spread of the virus, these measures had a detrimental effect, especially on those whose jobs were insecure. Undocumented migrants and refugees found themselves in an even more restrictive environment regarding their mobility, employability and access to their livelihoods.

This article investigates this topic as follows. The first section outlines the existing research and conceptualizes different degrees of legal precarity. The second section explores the Turkish state's provision of healthcare throughout the pandemic. The third scrutinizes undocumented migrants and refugees' access to livelihoods and support mechanisms at the local level. The final

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1 See the statistics at DGMM's website, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>. Note that statistics for asylum seekers are only estimates.

2 According to Turkey's refugee law, a refugee is someone who flees events occurring in Europe. Therefore, Turkey does not consider most persons who have obtained international protection and temporary protection as refugees. Nonetheless in this article, when referring to migrants who have sought and/or obtained protection from the Turkish authorities, I use the term 'refugee' to imply their request for protection and particular needs in Turkey.

section explores growing anti-migrant movements in Turkey in parallel to the pandemic. Even though the Turkish state has made Covid-19 treatment accessible for all, legal precarity and several other obstacles have made it difficult for undocumented migrants and refugees to access it. The pandemic and a growing political and economic uncertainty also seem to have stimulated anti-migrant movements.

### **Legal Precarity: Temporariness of Protection and Mobility Restrictions**

Undocumented migrants, rejected asylum seekers, or asylum seekers and refugees who do have the right to reside in a country but do not reside in a specified territory have long been forced to live in shadows and be invisible to state authorities. States may choose to arrest, detain or deport this population to demonstrate their sovereignty or choose to ignore their presence and make their cheap labor accessible for their citizens to exploit without the requirement to provide welfare for them. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has rendered each member of society (regardless of their legal status) necessary for policymakers to maintain public health. In this sense, the pandemic has rendered an invisible group visible to fight the spread of the virus and provide protection for all.

Existing research shows that throughout the pandemic, lockdowns have adversely affected undocumented migrants and refugees and caused a greater need for essential items and accommodation.<sup>3</sup> For example, while before the pandemic only specific groups of migrants such as single women and older people fulfilled NGOs' vulnerability criteria, during the pandemic almost all undocumented migrants and refugees needed support. NGOs, therefore, needed to re-think and adapt their criteria of vulnerability in line with the growing impoverishment among their beneficiaries.<sup>4</sup> Although some services could be provided online, lockdowns also prevented or limited some services. For example, social workers could provide consultations online or by phone, but they could not observe their beneficiaries in their own environments where they would typically pick up clues about their life circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

3 Aysen Üstübiçi and Sibel Karadağ, *Refugee Protection in Turkey during the First Phase of the Covid-19 Pandemic*. (Istanbul: Koc University, 2020), 24.

4 Ibid.

5 Aslihan Nisanci, Rumeysa Kahraman, Yusuf Alcelik, Ulviyenur Kiris, 'Working with refugees during Covid-19: Social worker voices from Turkey,' *International Social Work*, 63, 5 (2020): 685–690., 686–687.

Research also shows that undocumented migrants and refugees lacked long-term support systems that were predictable and tailored to their needs. NGOs provided vital support to disseminate information about the pandemic and distribute food and other essential items, but their services were short-term.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Başak Yavçan finds that some municipalities provided specialized services for refugees and other vulnerable populations thanks to their previous links to international networks.<sup>7</sup> Urhan and Arslankoç find that among municipalities of five districts in Istanbul, those with higher institutional capacity could provide more services than others.<sup>8</sup> In all cases, these services were short-term and depended on the availability of funding. Different legal statuses also continued to result in discriminatory outcomes to access protection. For instance, Karadağ and Üstübici found that Syrians under temporary protection had greater access to healthcare than other asylum seekers and refugees due to specialized healthcare centers for Syrians.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, undocumented migrants and non-Syrian asylum seekers and refugees did not have the same level of access to healthcare.

These differentiations are linked with the dual structure of the asylum system in Turkey. Turkey is a signatory state to the 1951 Refugee Convention yet still maintains a geographical limitation. Turkey's asylum law, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), also defines 'refugees' as only those fleeing events occurring in European countries. All other applicants are recognized as 'conditional refugees' and those who cannot be recognized as refugees or conditional refugees receive subsidiary protection provided that they would be at risk if they were to return to their country of origin or former country of residence. Additionally, and due to the increasing number of Syrian arrivals, on 22 October 2014 Turkey issued a Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR) and provided Syrian nationals, stateless persons and refugees from Syria with temporary protection. Although Syrians' status in Turkey is more secure than other states in the MENA region, it is still temporary. It depends only on the President's continuing approval of their residence in the country. How long conditional refugees and those under subsidiary protection can stay is similarly uncertain. Their residence in Turkey is only permitted until they can be

6 Aysen Üstübici and Sibel Karadağ, *Refugee Protection in Turkey during the First Phase of the Covid-19 Pandemic*, (Istanbul: Koc University, 2020), 24.

7 Başak Yavçan, 'Understanding Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey: Politics of the Local,' *APSA MENA Politics Section: MENA Politics Newsletter* 4, 1 (2021): 74–79.

8 Gülcan Urhan and Sinem Arslankoç, 'COVID-19 Pandemi Sürecinde Sosyal Politika ve Yerel Yönetimler: İstanbul İlçe Belediyeleri Örneği,' *Çalışma ve Toplum*, 69, 2 (2021): 945–980.

9 Sibel Karadağ and Aysen Üstübici, *Protection during pre-pandemic and Covid-19 periods in Turkey*, (Istanbul: Koç University, 2021).

resettled to third countries. With very few resettlement places available, many must continuously apply for the renewal of their status. It is this temporariness that leaves refugees in legal precarity and vulnerable to exploitation by employers and property owners.<sup>10</sup>

Another limitation for refugees in Turkey is the requirement to live in their city of registration. When applicants for international protection and temporary protection are registered with the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management (PDMM), they are assigned to a particular province. They must stay in this city throughout their application and after obtaining status. There is no publicly available information about how DGMM staff allocate applicants to particular cities. They are allocated based on unknown criteria and often without considering their needs, including access to employment. It has been reported that DGMM staff do consider family links, but these are only limited to first-degree family members, excluding siblings and cousins.<sup>11</sup> These cities may not be the preferred cities of applicants and many may have to travel to other cities where they can find work or where they can stay close to their relatives. If they do so, they cannot access their rights, as listed in the LFIP and TPR. Mobility requirements and difficulties in renewing legal statuses throughout the pandemic have contributed to growing precarity for asylum seekers and refugees.

The dual asylum system and mobility restrictions bring different degrees of legal precarity. Though all groups live in legal precarity, some are in an even more precarious situation than others. At the top of this hierarchy are Syrians and non-Syrian asylum seekers and refugees who are registered and reside in their allocated city. Below are Syrians and non-Syrians who are registered but who do not reside in their allocated city. Finally, the least protected group is those who did not claim asylum or whose applications were rejected but continue to live in Turkey with no valid residency permit. The extent to which each group can benefit from accessing healthcare and livelihoods may depend on where they are in this hierarchy. State authorities may also differentiate between Syrians and non-Syrians.

10 Feyzi Baban, Suzan Ilcan and Kim Rygiel, 'Syrian refugees in Turkey: pathways to precarity, differential inclusion, and negotiated citizenship rights,' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43, 1 (2017): 41–57; Secil E Ertorer, 'Asylum Regimes and Refugee Experiences of Precarity: The Case of Syrian Refugees in Turkey,' *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34, 3 (2021): 2568–2592.

11 AIDA, Turkey Report, The 'satellite city' system (2021), <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkey/freedom-movement>.

## Responses to Covid-19 and Continuing Challenges in Accessing Healthcare

Undocumented migrants and refugees were already having difficulties accessing hospital care in Turkey, even before Covid. Before the pandemic, access to health care opportunities for non-Syrian asylum seekers and status holders was limited. With the amendment made in Article 89, paragraph 3 (a) of the LFIP on 6 December 2019, the health insurance of international protection applicants and status holders started to be terminated one year after their registration. This restriction did not apply only to those with special needs and those specifically deemed appropriate by the authorities. Therefore, when the pandemic broke out in March 2020, many non-Syrian asylum seekers and status holders already did not have access to healthcare. Their challenges have become even more visible and vital since the eruption of the pandemic.

The most critical development during the pandemic period was on 9 April 2020, when Covid-19 testing and treatment were included in the 'emergency' scope of healthcare. With the help of this change, those who could not pay for health expenses could now be treated if they were diagnosed with Covid-19. Subsequently, Presidential Decree number 2399 dated 13 April 2020 stated that 'all persons, regardless of their social security' would be able to use personal protective equipment, tests, kits and other equipment and that these pieces of equipment would 'be provided and distributed by the Ministry of Health.' All patients could benefit from centrally supplied medicines free of charge.<sup>12</sup> In practice, due to difficulties in manufacturing and distribution, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, like all citizens, had difficulties accessing these free masks. Due to the problems experienced in practice, free mask distribution ended on 4 May and the masks were again on sale for individual purchase. Though the distribution of masks was only short-lived, the fact that Covid-19 treatment was included in the scope of emergency and that everyone could access it free of charge, regardless of status, is remarkable.

However, despite these developments in legislation, undocumented migrants and refugees faced three major obstacles in accessing healthcare throughout the pandemic. The first was the requirement to show Covid symptoms to access free testing and treatment. On 30 September 2020, the Minister of Health has confirmed that statistics in Turkey did not include the actual number of patients who show Covid-19 symptoms, as recommended by the

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<sup>12</sup> Cumhurbaşkanlığı Kararı. (2020, 13 April) Official Gazette (No: 2399). <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2020/04/20200414-16.pdf>.

World Health Organization, but only severe cases.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is not clear whether this provision enabled free treatment for all migrants. Moreover, given that not all tests provide correct results, some who are not diagnosed at the testing stage may not access healthcare in the scope of emergency treatment. Coupled with a lack of information about accessibility to emergency care, this may have prevented many from reaching out to authorities.

The second obstacle is related to the requirement to live in the cities in which asylum seekers and refugees are registered to access services. This requirement was not lifted during the pandemic, so those who lived in cities other than those to which they were registered had difficulty in accessing healthcare. This mobility restriction is important because one must apply first to a primary health care institution in the allocated city to access second and third-level health institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Health. In Turkey, primary health care services for Syrians are provided by Migrant Health Centers (MHCs, abbreviated as GSM in Turkish) established in places for every 4,000–7,000 Syrians under temporary protection.<sup>14</sup> MHCs were established in the scope of the ‘Development of Temporary Protected Syrians Health Status of the Republic of Turkey and submitted by Related Services’ (SIHHAT) project, funded by the European Union. As of September 2020, there were 178 MHCs in Turkey.<sup>15</sup> Each consists of at least a physician and an assistant.<sup>16</sup> The main advantage of MHCs for Syrians is that they employed Syrian health personnel and patient guidance staff who spoke Arabic and Turkish. Patients who arrive at MHCs are referred to hospitals if necessary. However, non-Syrians are at a disadvantage in accessing primary health care institutions. For them, small-scale Provincial Foreigners’ Polyclinics (PFPPs, abbreviated as YUP in Turkish) operate in 29 provinces<sup>17</sup> but they are not as active as MHCs and therefore limit referrals to second and third-level health institutions.

The third and most crucial obstacle has been the fear of eviction and deportation. According to a field study conducted by the Refugee Support Center, refugee participants stated that they did not want to go to health institutions due to fears of being deported from Turkey or being asked to leave their accommodation or being fired from their workplace if they were found to have

13 See BBC News, ‘Sağlık Bakanı Koca, vaka ve ölüm sayılarıyla ilgili iddialara yanıt verdi,’ September 30, 2020.

14 T.C. Sağlık Bakanlığı, ‘Göçmen Sağlığı Merkezleri/Birimleri,’ (2015). <http://www.hsgm.saglik.gov.tr/tr/mevzuat/genel-nitelikli-yazi-ve-gorusler/159.html>.

15 SIHHAT Projesi, ‘Proje Faaliyetleri,’ (2020). [https://www.sihhatproject.org/proje-faaliyetleri\\_0-657](https://www.sihhatproject.org/proje-faaliyetleri_0-657).

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.



Covid-19.<sup>18</sup> Undocumented migrants and refugees are at constant risk of being expelled for various reasons. A primary reason is not having valid residency permits. The renewal of identity cards and access to asylum have been severely affected throughout the pandemic, leaving many with no valid residency cards. Moreover, even if they are not deported, the risk of being removed from their workplace and accommodation is very high. Since 2013, fewer than 90,000 migrants and refugees could obtain social security in Turkey.<sup>19</sup> That means that around 97.5 per cent of migrants and refugees work with no social security in Turkey, risking their discharge.<sup>20</sup>

Fear of being deported is not unreasonable considering existing legislation. Both LFIP and TPR include 'public health' as one of the possible reasons for deportation and the Emergency Decree of October 2016 lists more reasons. These include deportation at any stage of their application for reasons of: (i) leadership, membership or support of a terrorist organization or a benefit-oriented criminal group; (ii) a threat to public order or public health; or (iii) if they have links to terrorist organizations defined by international institutions or organizations.<sup>21</sup> The decree does not specify the definition of terrorism nor of public order and public health and leaves asylum seekers and refugees at constant risk of being deported.

### Precarity and Challenges in Accessing Livelihoods

Even before the pandemic, undocumented migrants and refugees in Turkey were employed in precarious, often informal and short-term jobs.<sup>22</sup> As the

18 Mülteci Destek Derneği, 'Covid-19 Krizi Sürecinde Türkiye'deki Mültecilerin Durum Analizi,' (2020), 25. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/76479>.

19 Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, '4.1 Number of work permit given to foreigners by types of permission and years, 2011–2017,' (2017). <https://birim.ailevecalisma.gov.tr/media/11707/cal%C4%B1sma-hayati-istatistikleri-2017.pdf>.

20 Author's calculation based on the official statistics above.

21 AIDA, 'Protection from Refoulement,' (2018). <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkey/protection-refoulement#.ftn1>.

22 The Covid-19 outbreak also had varying impact on migrant and refugee workers in different sectors. The report titled 'Virus of Poverty', prepared the 'Development Workshop' in Turkey has shown the worsening situation of seasonal agricultural workers. In the agricultural sector, where migrant workers are heavily employed, employment opportunities decreased due to increasing measures for security and restrictions on inter-city travels. See, Kalkınma Atölyesi, *Virüs mü, Yoksulluk mu? Korona Virüs Salgınının Mevsimlik Gezici Tarım İşçileri ve Onların Çocukları ile Bütisel Üretime Olası Etkisi Hızlı Değerlendirme Raporu* (Ankara: Kalkınma Atölyesi and ILO, 2020).



economy worsened and the Turkish lira devalued, many of those employed informally were among the first to be fired, leaving them in a condition of 'hyper-precarity.'<sup>23</sup> According to the report *How did the Covid-19 Affect the Labor Market* published by the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) in June 2020, Syrian workers lost their jobs at a much higher rate than Turkish citizens. Some 26.4 per cent of Syrian workers under temporary protection who participated in the survey were given unpaid leave; 12.1 per cent were dismissed from their jobs; and 6.8 per cent of them stated that they closed their workplaces or decreased their hours. The same rates for Turkish citizens were 9 per cent, 2 per cent and 3.1 per cent, respectively. Loss of employment had a direct effect on livelihoods. While 50 per cent of Turkish citizens stated that they lost income since the start of the pandemic, this figure is 88 per cent for Syrian refugees.<sup>24</sup>

Those who worked in daily work before the pandemic could not look for work due to measures taken during the pandemic. Those under 20 years old were banned from going outside throughout successive lockdowns, contributing to the difficulty in looking for new short-term jobs. Curfews were introduced for weekends and evenings on weekdays, preventing work outside usual working hours. The report, *Sectoral Analysis of the Impact of Covid-19 Outbreak on Refugees in Turkey* prepared by the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants, illustrates the gravity of the situation. According to this report, the pre-pandemic level of unemployment among refugees was 17.74 per cent. After the pandemic, it had increased to 88.59 per cent. Participants listed the closure of businesses where they were previously working (40.82 per cent), dismissal (17.69 per cent) and not being able to find a new job (11.56 per cent). Aside from the sudden deterioration of their employment situation, daily payments such as rent, bills and food expenses of more than 90 per cent of participants had increased.<sup>25</sup>

At the national level, sustainable support mechanisms were limited. For instance, following the declaration of the pandemic, the government started the Social Protection Shield Program which provided some support for employees who were on mandatory leave due to the pandemic, but beneficiaries did not include undocumented migrants and refugees who were often working

23 Maissam Nimer and Susan Beth Rottmann, 'Logistification and hyper-precarity at the intersection of migration and pandemic governance: Refugees in the Turkish labour market,' *Journal of Refugee Studies*, (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab076>.

24 Şenay Akyıldız, *Covid-19 İşgücü Piyasasını Nasıl Etkiledi?* (Ankara: TEPAV, 2020), 5.

25 SGDD-ASAM, *Covid-19 Salgınının Türkiye'de Mülteciler Üzerindeki Etkilerinin Sektörel Analizi*, (Ankara: SGDD-ASAM, 2020).

informally. The only ongoing financial support for refugees that continued in this process was the financial aid loaded on the Red Crescent Card within the scope of the Social Cohesion Assistance (ESSN) Program paid for by the EU, but this aid was limited and even before the pandemic was not enough to cover all expenses. The Program also helped only 1.7 million people under temporary or international protection, leaving more than 2 million others with no access to assistance. The Social Service Centers in the Provincial Directorates of Family and Social Policies continued assisting those with an international or temporary protection identity document, but only for an interim period. Likewise, Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations affiliated with governors continued providing one-time cash assistance. They supported the most vulnerable, but their programs did not usually include refugees. Some organizations provided food aid,<sup>26</sup> but none of these was long-term, often given as one-time cash assistance.

At the local level, many municipalities provided specialized services for their migrant and refugee populations, but these were also limited. For example, services have included the distribution of food to citizens and non-citizens under the 'social kitchen' project implemented by the Municipalities of Ankara Metropolitan, Adana Metropolitan, Şişli, Haliliye, Kilis, Menemen and Şahinbey, and the provision of tablets and other educational materials in Gaziantep Metropolitan, Izmir Metropolitan and Tuzla in Istanbul.<sup>27</sup> Others have provided specialized services for refugees along with the funding they received; for example, Buca Municipality initiated online psycho-social support for disabled refugees.<sup>28</sup> However, as they were funded by specific projects, they were also short-term and limited.

In contrast, some other municipalities have obstructed the provision of services or made the living conditions for migrants and refugees even more difficult. For example, in January 2021, the AKP Fatih Municipality decided to ban renting accommodation to foreigners even if they may have valid residency permits. The AKP Mayor has stated that in eight months since their decision, 7,000 migrants have left the area.<sup>29</sup> It is not known whether these tenants were

26 Şenay Akyıldız, *Covid-19 İşgücü Piyasasını Nasıl Etkiledi?* (Ankara: TEPAV, 2020), 10.

27 See the details of these good practices in TEPAV, *Zorunlu Göçmenler için Sosyal Eşitlik: Pandemi Sürecinde Yerel Yönetimlerin ve STK'ların Rolü* (Ankara: TEPAV, 2020), 23–26.

28 Buca Belediyesi, 'Buca Belediyesi'nden engelli mültecilere pandemi desteği,' January 8, 2021. <http://www.buca.bel.tr/Haberler/2054/buca-belediyesi--nden-engelli-multecilere-pandemi-destegi.html>.

29 Haber Turk, 'Fatih Belediye Başkanı Ergün Turan: 8 ayda 7 bin göçmen Fatih'ten ayrıldı,' September 30, 2021. <https://www.haberturk.com/fatih-belediye-baskani-ergun-turan-fatih-te-gocmene-kiralik-ev-yok-3206126>.

forced to leave their homes and whether they could find new homes during the pandemic and lockdowns. The example of Fatih is particularly concerning as it is one of the municipalities hosting the largest number of migrants in the country.<sup>30</sup> Another example is from a smaller municipality, though with similarly drastic policies. In late July 2021, the CHP Mayor of Bolu, Tanju Özcan, proposed making some municipality services such as water and waste management ten times more expensive for all foreigners in the city.<sup>31</sup> The city council accepted this proposal and it was approved by CHP and İYİ Party members, two parties advocating for Syrian refugee repatriation. Özcan stated that the principle of equality included in the Constitution was only available to Turkish citizens and not between citizens and non-citizens.<sup>32</sup> As seen in these examples, even municipalities led by different parties (the ruling AKP and the major opposition CHP) may react to the presence of migrants in their territory and make populist, though unlawful, policy changes. In these cases, we can see that municipalities do not always act in good faith but also think about their voter base, which seems to be increasingly reacting towards the presence of migrants.

### Growing Anti-migrant Movements and Assaults

In Turkey, the later stages of the pandemic during the summer of 2021 saw growing anti-migrant movements. Anti-migrant attitudes, particularly towards the Syrians in the country, existed long before the pandemic<sup>33</sup> but in the later stages of the pandemic, some opposition political parties' unfavorable discourses around Syrians may have contributed to negative attitudes. For instance, the CHP, the main opposition party, and a right-wing nationalist party, the İYİ Party, had advocated for Syrians' repatriation long before the

30 Hürriyet, 'İşte yabancı uyrukluların yoğun olduğu iller,' February 3, 2019. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/iste-yabanci-uyruklularin-yogun-oldugu-iller-41104006>.

31 Hürriyet, 'Bolu Belediye Başkanı açıkladı... Kentte yabancı uyruklulardan 10 kat fazla su faturası ücreti alınacak,' July 27, 2021. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/bolu-belediye-baskani-acikladi-kentte-yabanci-uyruklulardan-10-kat-fazla-su-faturasi-ucreti-alinacak-41860162>.

32 NTV, 'Bolu Belediye Başkanı Tanju Özcan'ın yabancıların faydalandığı bazı belediye hizmetlerine zam önergesi kabul edildi,' August 4, 2021. [https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/bolu-belediye-baskani-tanju-ozcanin-yabancilarin-faydalandigi-bazi-belediye-hizmetlerine-zam-onergesi-kabul-edildi,LvbqEAG\\_cUeBhcHxJmKzZA](https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/bolu-belediye-baskani-tanju-ozcanin-yabancilarin-faydalandigi-bazi-belediye-hizmetlerine-zam-onergesi-kabul-edildi,LvbqEAG_cUeBhcHxJmKzZA).

33 Okan Cem Çirakoğlu, et al., 'The Mediating Role of Perceived Threat in the Relationship between Casual Contact and Attitudes towards Syrian Refugees in Turkey,' *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fezu18>.

pandemic. In July 2021, CHP Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's statement further enlivened the long-standing debates:

When we will come to power we will give our blessings and return our Syrian guests to their hometowns in two years. This is one of our top five priorities. Our plans and programs are ready.<sup>34</sup>

Right after Kılıçdaroğlu's statement, the regime changed in Afghanistan and many Afghans began to make their way towards Turkey. Possible scenarios around the arrival of millions of Afghans made the debate about refugees even more heated. CHP consecutively started a campaign called '(our) border is (our) honor.'<sup>35</sup>

AKP staff members criticized this approach, but by doing so also revealed how fragile the Turkish economy was and how Syrians acted as a dressing over this fragility. For example, AKP Chairman Advisor Yasin Aktay said, '[i]f you let Syrians go, the country's economy will collapse.'<sup>36</sup> Similarly, AKP Deputy Chairman Mehmet Özhaskeki noted that in some cities, Syrians kept 'the industry alive, [...] don't make populism in vain, you can't send them.'<sup>37</sup> But the debate at this point was already heated. Referring to Aktay, Muharrem İnce, a candidate in the Presidential Elections of 2018 against Erdoğan, said:

He ruined the economy! [Now he] seeks salvation in the Syrians. He thinks, if Syrians left, the economy would collapse. The economy has already collapsed! Young people are unemployed; fathers are desperate [...] The economy will improve when you and Syrians leave!<sup>38</sup>

The summer of 2021 saw a growing debate around Syrians' repatriation and discontent about possible new migration flows with statements from both sides.

34 @kilicdarogluk, Twitter account, July 16, 2021. <https://twitter.com/kilicdarogluk/status/1416103645209321475?s=20> This and the following statements are the author's own translation from Turkish.

35 Independent, 'CHP'den 'sınır namustur' kampanyası,' August 18, 2021. <https://www.indyturk.com/node/400721/chpden-sinir-namustur-kampanyasi>.

36 Cumhuriyet, 'Erdoğan'ın danışmanı Aktay: Suriyeliler giderse ülke ekonomisi çöker,' July 26, 2021. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/erdoganin-danismani-aktay-suriyeliler-giderse-ulke-ekonomisi-coker-1855405>.

37 Cumhuriyet, 'AKP'li Özhaskeki'den 'mülteci' açıklaması: Sanayiye onlar ayakta tutuyor; gönderemezsinis,' July 27, 2021. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/akpli-ozhasekiden-multeci-aciklamasi-sanayiye-onlar-ayakta-tutuyor-gonderemezsinis-1855656>.

38 @vekilince, Twitter account, July 26, 2021. <https://twitter.com/vekilince/status/1419703426573901825?s=20>.

Hate speech against Syrians escalated rapidly. In August 2021, Altındağ, a district populated by many Syrians in the capital city, Ankara, witnessed acts of violence. Previously, a group of Syrian and Turkish young men had started quarrelling and one Turkish man was killed.<sup>39</sup> This was followed by hundreds of protestors taking to the streets of Altındağ and attacking Syrian shops and businesses until the protest was put down by riot police. Anti-migrant sentiments and pressures on Syrians to return existed long before the pandemic but seem to have increased throughout the pandemic period. Behind this hatred may have been a historically taught hostility towards Arabs, uncertainty around how long Syrians would stay and, with regime change in Afghanistan, uncertainty around how many new refugees would arrive in the country. The rapid deterioration of economic conditions, increase in unemployment and decrease in purchasing power may also have fed into an environment of uncertainty for all. Overall, these events show that the conditions of those who already live in legal precarity may worsen in such sudden ruptures.

### Conclusion

Crises like pandemics aggravate vulnerabilities for any low-income residents in a country, but they do so more for those without secure legal status. Throughout the pandemic, undocumented migrants and refugees not only had limited access to public health provisions, but were also at greater risk of being considered to be a threat to public health and public security. In Turkey, even though treatment for Covid-19 was included in the scope of emergency care, it was still difficult for those with no secure legal status to access it. This population was also further affected by the economic impact of the pandemic. Access to livelihoods was limited at the national and local levels, leaving those in precarious conditions and reliant on short-term funds.

Crises like pandemics also show that those with no secure legal status can be scapegoated for the adverse effects of worsening economic and political conditions in a country. Instead of devising and proposing new economic policies, some major opposition parties in Turkey took the populist path of targeting migrants. Anti-migrant movements grew, perhaps unsurprisingly in times of uncertainty like the pandemic, leaving undocumented migrants and refugees

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39 HaberTurk, 'Ankara Altındağ'da olaylar sona erdi! Ankara Valiliği'nden açıklama,' August 11, 2021. <https://www.haberturk.com/ankara-altindag-da-olaylar-sona-erdi-ankara-valiligi-nden-aciklama-3159850>.

in an even more precarious situation. This article contributes to the research on the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic at the national and local levels. Future research should also explore how international aid by the EU, other states and international organizations like the UNHCR affected mitigant vulnerabilities and changed dynamics at the local level.