

# ARTICLE

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## Media Portrayals of Refugees and their Effects on Social Conflict and Social Cohesion

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### Abstract

*Media portrayals of refugees can produce prejudice toward refugees as well as understanding and acceptance. In that sense, the media have the potential to be part of the problem or part of the solution in issues of conflict and cohesion between host and refugee communities. In this critical time when the future of Syrian refugees in Turkey is being discussed, this article reviews previous research on the media's representation of refugees, identifies the dominant representational practices and discusses their effects on the inclusion and exclusion of refugees, which may lead to social cohesion or social conflict, respectively. The main body of the article first identifies the negative effects of refugee representations, namely victimization, depoliticization, dehumanization, marginalization, homogenization and de-individualization, and explains in what ways these representations stigmatize refugees as "other" in society and produce prejudice and xenophobia toward them. The article then turns to the representation strategies used to reduce prejudice and motivate understanding in society. Here, empathizing with refugees and taking a rights-based journalism approach are identified among the media's inclusion practices toward refugees. Overall, specifically focusing on Syrians in Turkey, the paper aims to initiate a discussion on how the media can play a role in assisting the acceptance of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in a new country by raising awareness about the media's representational practices.*

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## Introduction

Since the start of the war in Syria in 2011, more than 3.5 million Syrians have sought refuge in Turkey, making Turkey the country hosting the highest number of refugees worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Questions about the future of such a big refugee/asylum seeker/migrant population in the country raise social, political and demographic concerns for the Turkish government.<sup>2</sup> Currently, the future of Syrians in Turkey is being discussed around the topics of voluntary refoulement, non-refoulement, integration and citizenship.<sup>3</sup> However, perhaps the most urgent topic concerns the building of understanding and cohesion between Syrians and Turkish citizens living together in cities, since it is unknown what ratio of the Syrian population will return to Syria or remain in Turkey.

Article 96 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection assigns the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) as the official body responsible for cohesion in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> On its website, the DGMM cites the types of cohesion activities it organizes to equip Syrians with the knowledge and skills necessary for their adaptation to different aspects of social life.<sup>5</sup> The effectiveness of these activities requires critical assessment; however, what concerns this study is how the Turkish community is prepared to accept living with Syrians, which is also an important question, since any successful cohesion process requires public support and acceptance. In addition to government institutions, the media plays a key role in facilitating public acceptance.

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between people.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, media practices can motivate empathy, acceptance and peace between groups when they intend to promote a culture of co-existence and mutual understanding in their portrayals of minority and vulnerable groups. That is to say, the media is both part of the problem and the solution, for media representations can produce effects toward the inclusion or exclusion of refugees.

The starting point of this article is the question of how the media plays a role in both facilitating and hindering social inclusion and cohesion, by producing positive and negative portrayals of refugees that influence everyday practices and interactions. The study aims to answer this question through a review of existing research on media representations of refugees in general, and Syrians in Turkey in particular. The study identifies the dominant representational practices in refugee/Syrian portrayals, discusses their various effects on refugee identity, and then considers their implications for the acceptance or exclusion of refugees in the host society.

The study does not make a suggestion about the best solutions for the future of Syrians in Turkey and elsewhere; rather, it suggests that during the time that Syrians stay in Turkey, maintaining good relationships between Syrian and Turkish communities is crucial for social peace. In that context, the study aims to make a contribution to understanding the role of media representations in processes leading to the social exclusion or inclusion of refugees. The main research questions guiding the study are:

1. What are the common forms of representing refugees in the media?
2. What are the effects of these representations in producing a) prejudice and xenophobia, and b) acceptance and empathy toward refugees?
3. What are the effects of these representations on issues of social conflict and social cohesion?

The following section presents background information about the discourses and public opinions about Syrian refugees in Turkey. The main body of the paper first discusses how media portrayals produce effects of exclusion and conflict. Then it discusses the media's more inclusive practices toward refugees and how they motivate social inclusion and cohesion.

## Discourses and Public Perceptions about Syrians in Turkey

When the war started in Syria in 2011, the Turkish government opened its borders to Syrians fleeing war and welcomed them in the country as "our guests" and "brothers," expecting that the war would be over soon and their

stay in Turkey would be for a limited period of time. The Turkish government's official discourses about guests and brothers were also reflected in the media, and a majority of the media portrayed Syrians as victims of war who need urgent humanitarian help.<sup>7</sup> Particularly between the years 2011 and 2015, a sympathetic perspective dominated the official and public discussions, while negative portrayals appeared less frequently.<sup>8</sup> However, as the war conditions continued and the Syrians' return was delayed, their population in Turkey grew and their presence in urban spaces increased. Particularly since 2015, the public perception of Syrians as guests and their feelings of compassion toward them have started to be replaced by a growing sentiment that Syrians are overstaying their welcome.<sup>9</sup>

Recent studies reveal that Turkish public opinion toward Syrians has grown to be more negative.<sup>10</sup> Having conducted interviews with Turkish citizens, Saracoğlu and Bélanger propose that Turkish citizens' negative opinions are related to a perceived loss, which is expressed as the loss of economic gains, of national cohesion, and of urban space.<sup>11</sup> The perceived loss of economic gains is manifested through accusations that economic resources are flowing to Syrians, or through concerns over competition for employment, or through misinformation such that Syrians receive a monthly salary from the government. Anxiety about the loss of national cohesion appears as perceiving Syrians as foreign threats to national unity and is manifested in groundless opinions such that Syrians have made the country an unsafe place or through debates against the possibility of granting citizenship to Syrians.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, anxiety about the loss of urban space to Syrians is about perceiving the expansion of Arabic culture in cities as a cultural threat to Turkish urban life and values. It may be manifested through criticisms about the visibility of Arabic signs on restaurants and cafes, or through the social media lynching of all Syrians on the basis of imprecise crime news, or through hostile attitudes toward Syrians for using public spaces. At times, the media had also taken part in triggering feelings of hatred regarding Syrians' visibility in public spaces by making critical news about Turkish beaches being "filled" with Syrians, which supposedly makes "Turks feel like foreigners,"<sup>13</sup> or by producing fake news portraying Syrians smoking shishas and having a good time on beaches.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on Syrians enjoying public spaces connotes the idea that they are not genuine refugees in need of help but are instead taking advantage of Turkish resources.

These perceptions of threats are not specific to Syrian refugees in Turkey. Refugees and immigrants are exposed to the same kinds of accusations all around the world.<sup>15</sup> Although many of these stereotypical perceptions are

based on misinformation, myth and sometimes scapegoating, it is vital to calm down citizens' anxieties about the presence of foreigners in their country and prepare them for living together, which is an essential condition for social peace in any migration-receiving society.

Cohesion or integration activities generally target immigrants and refugees (rather than citizens) as homogenous groups (rather than individuals with different needs and aspirations) and aim to incorporate them into the economic, cultural and social life of the receiving country by providing them with housing, health services, education and work opportunities.<sup>16</sup> However, their successful cohesion does not guarantee their acceptance, because local communities' emotions toward foreigners can be mixed and the provision of services to them can affect local people's perceptions of them positively or negatively, which holds true for Syrians in Turkey too. For example, if refugees/Syrians do not work and participate in the labor market, they are perceived as an economic burden; whereas when they actively work they are accused of seizing work opportunities of local workers.<sup>17</sup> Murat Erdoğan reveals Turkish people's mixed and inconsistent opinions about Syrians in a public survey conducted with a sample of 1,501 people.<sup>18</sup> In the survey, 70 percent of those surveyed stated that they see Syrians as a burden for the Turkish economy; 60 percent of them criticize the cost of support given to them when there are poor Turkish citizens; and almost half of them (47.4%) are against the idea that Syrians should be given work permits, which is surprising because this option can actually ease the perceived burden on the economy.

Other studies report that when refugees' conditions are visibly improved as a result of successful policies and individual initiatives, another concern is raised among the public about the genuineness of refugees, because "real" refugees are *expected* to look suffering.<sup>19</sup> Since refugees are aware that the humanitarian aid they receive is justified on the basis of the perception that they are in desperate need, this perception also informs the role they play "to gain the approval of the helpers and to be successful in obtaining aid," as Barbara Harrell-Bond explains.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the view that refugees should stop receiving aid when their conditions are improved leaves refugees in a vulnerable position in which they fear not to be welcomed by the host community anymore.

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These arguments suggest that a successful cohesion process is possible not only through preparing newcomers, but also through preparing the local people to voluntarily accept living with newcomers.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, it is important to understand local people, how their perceptions of refugees and of threats are constructed, and to consider ways to counter negative opinions and attitudes toward refugees in society. Governments work with a variety of social institutions in this process, the media being one of them.

The media are the main machinery for the promotion of social conflict and social cohesion.<sup>22</sup> Media offer a platform for the production, circulation and interpretation of meaning concerning groups of people and events. The content of these meanings may spread understanding or hatred among groups. When the subject matter involves ethnic issues or minorities, media discourses may arguably be easily formed around polarization between “us” and “them” and promote conflict rather than cohesion.<sup>23</sup> Obviously, media have complicated effects on conflict and cohesion and these may not be direct effects, and they may produce different results for different groups at different times. Nevertheless, drawing on the findings of existing research on the representations of immigrants and refugees in general as well as the portrayals of Syrians in the Turkish media in particular, it is possible to talk about dominant representational practices used by the media and discuss their possible effects on the construction and perception of refugee identities. In the following section, first, the effects of media portrayals toward exclusion and social conflict, then the effects of media portrayals toward inclusion and social cohesion are discussed.

### Portrayals of Refugees Steering Exclusion and Social Conflict

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#### *Victimization of Refugees*

One common argument that emerges in many studies on the representation of refugees is that refugees are represented as victims.<sup>24</sup> Studies on the

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representation of Syrians in the Turkish media support this argument through findings that Syrians appear predominantly in news constructed around the discourse of victimhood; they are represented as “suffering,” “poor people” and “in need of help.”<sup>25</sup> Victimhood is a stereotypical characteristic of being a refugee, which is repeated in different national contexts to represent displaced people from different ethnicities and nationalities.

Thinking about the effects of presenting refugees as victims, the most immediate effect seems to be positive. When refugees are represented and perceived as helpless, suffering people in need of charity, these representations raise a sense of responsibility and justify institutions’ humanitarian actions toward them, while making it easier to raise public support for inclusive policies targeting them.<sup>26</sup> However, a drawback is that if support for refugees is legitimized on the basis of their need for charity only (not on the basis of international refugee rights), then they are no longer perceived as refugees when their conditions are relatively improved and they are expected to return to their countries, as mentioned above.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, the victim perception does not serve to bring about permanent social acceptance and cohesion on its own.

Perceiving refugees solely as victims causes other problems for refugees too. Although victimhood is a major part of the refugee experience, it is not the only one; refugee experiences are too complicated and diverse to be reduced to one. Refugees are indeed people who have survived war or conflicts and who are in the middle of starting new lives in a new country. Many of them get involved in the economy as entrepreneurs or workers; refugee children attend schools even if it may be economically challenging for their families; and women, even if they mostly stay at home, remain in the center of building a new life for their families in a new society.<sup>28</sup> All of these roles involve real actions. However, the dominance of their representation as victims hides and erases these actions and achievements from the public imagination and reduces them to the image of the “helpless, incapable and incompetent” refugee. In these ways, the discourse of victimization constructs refugees as dependent subjects, denying their agency.

Another result of victimization is that when refugees are perceived as incapable of making decisions, their opinions about matters are seen irrelevant and thus they are not consulted. As a result, in the news, other people (bureaucrats, public administrators, politicians, etc.) speak and make decisions for them even when the subject matter directly concerns refugee conditions and experiences.<sup>29</sup> It is in these ways that victimization first produces the image of voiceless and silent refugees, then excludes refugees from decision-making processes.

## *Depoliticization of Refugees*

A further implication of victimization is that it depoliticizes the refugee issue. Refugees are political subjects with political rights, whose situation requires rights-based political decisions and actions. But when the media predominantly discuss the refugee issue around the discourse of victimhood, which is an emotional approach to the problem, political discussions seeking political solutions to the problem are not allocated a fair amount of space and eventually they are excluded from public debates. This is an example of depoliticization by the media. To put it simply, when refugee issues are not approached as political problems and not discussed around the rights of refugees and the responsibilities of (inter)national actors, then they are depoliticized.

In the same way, the refugee issue is depolitized when there is no contextual reporting on the subject. Contextual reporting of refugees refers to understanding and reporting on the backgrounds of the groups of refugees, which involves understanding the reasons behind the wars and crises in refugees' countries and the processes behind refugee mobility. Such reporting on refugees is different from reporting their victimhood from an emotional perspective, as it places the issue back in the arena of politics, provides an understanding of the problem and discusses ways of improving refugees' lives while focusing on their rights as refugees.<sup>30</sup>

The media report of IGAM (the Research Center on Asylum and Migration), for example, surveys the news published about Syrian refugees in the Turkish media between June 2017 and November 2018 and reveals the lack of information and discussions about refugee rights.<sup>31</sup> The study finds that although the media widely report the difficult living conditions of Syrian refugees, they rarely mention refugee rights concerning housing, health, education, work and social benefits. Even in the news in which refugees are openly marked as victims, the claims of rights that could solve their victimhood are mentioned in only 15 percent of them. In addition, the opinions of NGOs working with refugees and for refugee rights are not represented in the news.

The reasons behind depoliticization may be different in different contexts. It can be speculated that depoliticization in the news is used as a strategy to release the responsible actors from their responsibilities. For example, political actors may prefer to talk about the refugee issue not within the frame of their "responsibilities" toward refugees, but within the frame of "humanitarian aid," which positions themselves (or the nation) as *benevolent* people helping people in need.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, the lack of a political context in the news may be because

journalists are not trained to cover the issue. This was obvious particularly in the beginning of the refugee crisis when untrained journalists failed to pick up the correct terms among “refugees,” “asylum seekers,” “migrants” and “illegal migrants” and they used these terms interchangeably to refer to Syrians fleeing the war.<sup>33</sup> Not using the correct terminology fails to position the discussion in the correct political context. Conversely, using the correct terms, such as asylum seekers or refugees, justifies why these people had to leave their countries, indicates that their problems are linked to political factors that are out of their control, and brings the topic of their rights as asylum seekers or refugees into the debates.

### *Dehumanization of Refugees*

Another recurring argument among the research on the representation of refugees is that as much as they are victimized, refugees are portrayed as threats and risks to the members of host societies. Various studies analyzing different national media arrive at the conclusion that immigrants and refugees are portrayed as threats through claims that 1) they are illegals,<sup>34</sup> criminals and terrorists, 2) they are invading and flooding the country, 3) they carry diseases and 4) they are not genuine refugees but are trying to take advantage of the host country’s refugee policies.<sup>35</sup> Studies on the Turkish media make similar points; they argue that alongside portrayals of refugees as victims, Syrians are portrayed as “threats” around the topics of illegality, human trafficking, crime, security and economic risks.<sup>36</sup>

The perception of threat is a key element in shaping attitudes toward refugees. Not only does it lead to discrimination against and exclusion of the group, it facilitates the dehumanization of refugees. Dehumanization is the “denial of the humanity” of a group.<sup>37</sup> It is a process in which groups are perceived as lacking human attributes, even as not having achieved much progress from their animal origins, thus lacking emotions, intelligence, morality and civility. This is actually a racist perception as it removes the group from the human race. Dehumanization may also occur in more complex ways, in which others’ abilities to experience complex human emotions are denied. Here, primary emotions such as fear and pleasure are attributed to everyone, while complex emotions such as hope and remorse are attributed to members of the in-group only.<sup>38</sup>

Dehumanization of refugees occurs when they are defined not as people fleeing war zones but as masses, floods, invaders or carriers of diseases. It also occurs when refugees are discussed as numbers. In a more latent manner, dehumanization occurs in debates in which it is accepted that

refugees are people in need of protection, but the cost of support given to them is problematized through the argument that there are poor local people who deserve that support more than refugees, which was a criticism raised by Turkish respondents in a survey.<sup>39</sup> This perception suggests that refugees are not equal with “us;” thus they are less worthy of some level of standards.

The above examples demonstrate that dehumanization produces real effects for refugees in terms of how they are perceived and treated. Some of these effects may even place the lives of refugees at risk. When a group is perceived or described as lacking human sensibility, “they are seen as falling outside of the realm of our moral obligations” and mistreatment of the group and antisocial behaviors toward them may become justified.<sup>40</sup> These behaviors may be legitimized through claims that our society, particularly “our kids and women” should be protected from these threats. It may even be claimed that the group deserves their negative conditions.

Trying to understand the social and psychological reasons behind dehumanization, Esses et al. suggest that some individuals dehumanize other groups to protect their privileged positions and keep other groups in their places within the community, thus protecting the status quo.<sup>41</sup> The perception or feeling of the loss of economic gains, urban space and national unity to Syrians in Turkey is an extension of this wish to maintain privileges and protect the status quo against Syrians. It is also noted, particularly for the opposition media in Turkey, that Syrians are portrayed as security risks, criminals and potential terrorists in order to criticize the Turkish government’s open-door policy and inclusive actions toward Syrians.<sup>42</sup> In this case, dehumanizing refugees serves political interests, in this case to attack the political decisions of the government.

### *Marginalization of Refugees*

In any social structure, there are some dominant groups at the core and in power while others are at the periphery. Marginalization is about producing this order in representation. Marginalization is “the presentation of social groups as outside society, as sitting on the edge and disconnected from the cohesive center.”<sup>43</sup> It attributes some morals to the group under discussion, raises concerns about whether the group can ever integrate with rest of the society and positions them as a threat to the culture, norms and values of the society. In this respect, marginalization targets newcomers and any minority groups already living within the society, for it raises a discussion that the group has failed to integrate.

The best examples of marginalization occurred in the post-September 11 environment targeting Muslim immigrants living in European societies. There were increased debates, particularly in countries with larger Muslim populations such as France, that Muslims were not able to integrate with the European way of life. As part of these debates, in 2004, France banned students from wearing any conspicuous religious garment or object in public schools, in the name of the principle of *laïcité*. The law targeted all religions; however, it was argued that it disproportionately affected Muslim schoolgirls wearing headscarves.<sup>44</sup> In 2010, France also banned the concealment of the face in public spaces, for the purpose of public security. The ban had the effect of forbidding the wearing of the Islamic *niqab* and *burqa*, which covers the whole body, and in 2012 two Muslim women were prosecuted, convicted and fined for wearing *niqab*. Following their complaints to the UN Human Rights Committee, the Committee decided in 2018 that the ban on the *niqab* was a violation of human rights and it “could have the effect of confining [veiled women] to their homes, impeding their access to public services and marginalizing them.”<sup>45</sup>

At the heart of these bans was a view that perceived the cultural values of Muslim immigrants as a threat to French secularism and security. Seeing Muslims’ lifestyles as a cultural threat, their use of cultural symbols was criminalized, and thus Muslim groups’ cultural habits were excluded from public spaces. This was an example of marginalizing Muslim minorities through a concern and anxiety regarding their cultures.

Actually, the claim that Eastern and Muslim cultures are not compatible with Western values is the main argument of the clash of civilizations thesis, which is a contemporary form of orientalist discourse.<sup>46</sup> Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilizations defines Eastern cultures, particularly the Middle East and Islam, as the source of terrorism and violence, and posits Islam as the main threat to Western civilization.<sup>47</sup> This orientalist notion today particularly attacks Muslim immigrants, refugees and minorities living in Western societies and the phrase “the Orient within” is often used to refer to them.

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One study that explores how the media represent and marginalize Muslim immigrants in Australia through the use of an orientalist discourse was conducted by Peter Manning.<sup>48</sup> Resembling Edward Said's much-quoted work *Covering Islam*, Manning explores the coverage of Muslims, Arabs and the Middle East in the Australian media in the years before and after September 11, 2011. He examines the language, images and narratives used in the media and argues that Arabs and Muslims are represented as unapproachable and unassimilable groups in society; their cultures are represented not only as different but also as an obstacle for cohesion and co-existence. He comes to the conclusion that orientalism is the main discourse shaping the representations of Muslims in the media, reproducing the idea of the incompatibility of Muslim immigrants' beliefs and values with the Western way of life.

It may be concluded, therefore, that one effect of marginalization is to produce a crisis mentality that provokes anxiety among the public by portraying the lives and views of immigrants and refugees as a (cultural) threat to "our" culture and common way of life. When their cultures are portrayed in opposition to the dominant group's values, these groups are positioned as against the social order, so their values and views are outlawed and marginalized altogether. In this way, marginalization feeds the perception of threat and the negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, and works against their social cohesion with the host community.

### *Homogenization and De-individualization of Refugees*

Another problem occurring in the representations of refugees is homogenization. This refers to representing the refugee population as a uniform group sharing the same characteristics and conditions, as if they were all of the same kind. This is in large part the result of representing refugees stereotypically as either helpless victims or threats to society. These stereotypical representations reduce them to a few properties and erase the diverse individual differences and experiences, such as the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs and initiatives, as discussed above. Therefore, homogenization also produces the effect of the de-individualization of refugees.

Refugees are de-individualized when they are represented without individual characteristics. Georgiou and Zaborowski illustrate this point in their report about the press coverage of the 2015 "refugee crisis" in eight European countries (the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Serbia and the United Kingdom).<sup>49</sup> One of their findings reveals that although there is much said about refugees in the press, refugee descriptions are highly limited. The news do not give information about refugees' names, gender,

age, profession or skills. Similarly, information about their individual stories, lives and cultures is also limited. That is to say that information about who these people are is absent in the news and “refugees thus emerge from these narratives as an anonymous, unskilled group.”<sup>50</sup>

Another way in which homogenization and de-individualization occur concerns how refugees are named or labelled. Studies on the European press<sup>51</sup> and Turkish media<sup>52</sup> reveal that the generic term “Syrians” is used to refer to Syrian refugees in the news; they are named after their national or ethnic identity. The labels that express political statuses such as temporary protection, refugee, asylum seeker or immigrant occur less often. The use of the generic name “Syrians,” rather than a political status, produces some consequences.

As mentioned above, when people’s political statuses are not used, the reasons why they left their country, why they are in Turkey and what rights they have in Turkey are forgotten in the news and this makes it difficult to discuss their conditions through a rights-based perspective. Second, the generic name “Syrians” does not make a differentiation between those Syrians who fled to Turkey and those living in Syria and other countries.<sup>53</sup> However, it is known that many Syrians who fled to Turkey were living close to Turkish borders or had relatives in Turkey, which indicates that they had relations with Turkey previously, rather than being total strangers to the country and its culture. Third, as the generic name “Syrians” emphasizes the ethnic origin of the Syrian community in Turkey, it positions Syrians (them) as an out-group with an ethnic identity distinct from Turks (us). In this way, the naming of Syrians, and referring to social groups by their ethnic group identities in general, emphasizes social and cultural differences between the refugee group and the host community, and thus may serve to maintain separation and distance between them, rather than making a contribution to social cohesion.

## Portrayals of Refugees Steering Inclusion and Social Cohesion

As much as the media’s representation practices may promote separation and exclusion, the media’s main role is recognized as bringing people together around an imagined community by disseminating cultural norms, values and emotions, and enabling them to imagine themselves as part of the larger society, even if they have no direct interaction with each other.<sup>54</sup> In that respect, the media can mobilize masses toward a socially cohesive society. In terms of promoting cohesion and acceptance of immigrants and refugees, certain modes of reporting and representation are consulted. One of them aims at empathizing with refugees, the other one is a specific approach to journalism called rights-based journalism.

## *Empathizing with Refugees*

Empathy is proposed as a key element to reduce prejudice and increase positive attitudes toward foreigners.<sup>55</sup> The media's potential in mobilizing feelings of empathy between groups is recognized by many institutions and NGOs. Particularly when conflicts were accelerating in Syria, various international NGOs and charities initiated campaigns to inform the world about what is happening in Syria and how Syrians are affected by the situation. In one of these campaigns, the international charity group Save the Children produced two short films titled *Most Shocking Second a Day*<sup>56</sup> in 2014 and *Still the Most Shocking a Day*<sup>57</sup> in 2016. The films recreate the real situations experienced in Syria as happening in London and show how a British child's life was transformed over a year of war. The first film starts with footage of a British girl happily blowing out candles on a birthday cake with her parents, then over the scenes of her secure and settled life we hear the television news reporting about the outbreak of conflicts in the country which is followed by gradually increasing sounds and views of bombings in the city. The girl and her parents leave their home for a safer place; they live on the streets and in parks before they end up at a refugee camp where the father is separated from the girl and the mother. One year passes in the camp and the video ends with footage of the little girl and her mother in a refugee tent. The mother has made a simple desert with a birthday candle on it, telling the little girl to make a wish. The scene concludes with a dramatic and haunting saddened look in her eyes, which can be interpreted as her one wish would be having her father and her life back. The second film, which was produced two years after the first one, shows what happens next to the mother and the girl. The film shows that the war has spread to other places in the country, including where the refugee camp is located. The mother finds a place only for one in a refugee boat and puts the girl in the boat with the hope of saving her life initially and reuniting with her in another country. The boat sinks, the girl is found unconscious on a shore and placed in a refugee camp. The two films end with the texts, "Just because it isn't happening here doesn't mean it isn't happening" and "It is happening now. It's happening here."

The most important effect of the two films on the viewer is that by replacing the stereotypical image of the refugee with a Western girl and by reforming the situation in a Western context, they communicate the message that wars can happen anywhere and when they happen people are affected in the same way regardless of their ethnicity, nationality or religion. They intend portray the similarity between the Western and non-Western people to produce empathy.

Another important power of the films is that by depicting the lives of people before they become “refugees,” they provide a non-stereotypical image of refugees and make people see refugees for who they are: regular, ordinary people whose lives have fallen apart because of war and persecution. Thus, representing refugees as ordinary people depicts the human qualities of refugees and challenges the dehumanization and marginalization of refugees. Ordinariness also reminds the viewers that the terms ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’ do not define who they are but define their conditions or political statuses. In this way, representations that highlight the ordinariness of refugees show them as sharing similar features with us (non-refugees) and aim to bridge the constructed difference between “us” and “them,” which is a big step toward acceptance and inclusion.

### *Rights-based Approach to Covering Refugees*

Recently, the term rights-based journalism has been used as an approach to journalism that aims at ending social conflicts between groups in society. Rights-based journalism as a practice aims to draw attention to violations of rights and to make news focusing on the rights of people.<sup>58</sup> It particularly focuses on protecting the rights of minority, disadvantaged and marginalized groups including women, children, immigrants, refugees, etc. It is a type of journalism that informs the public about the human rights as well as the economic, social and political rights of individuals. Reporting on human rights is important to increasing the public’s knowledge of their rights and the rights of others. This also raises a perception that violations of rights will not be ignored, and will be reported and known, which increases a sense of security and awareness among the public.

A UNESCO report identifies the principles of a rights-based approach to journalism; these principles are also important while reporting on refugees.<sup>59</sup> According to the first principle, when reporting on refugees, journalists should refer to the relevant conventions (e.g. Geneva Refugee Convention, human rights conventions, or policies at the national level that concern the protection of refugees) that their governments have signed. This informs the public about international obligations toward refugees and about refugees’ rights. A second principle requires the participation of all of the affected parties in the news. Most of the time, the media exclude the views of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, which is the case for representations of refugees in international and Turkish media alike. However, the inclusion of refugee voices should be a priority in the news to achieve power balances in reporting and prevent the marginalization of these groups. According to the third principle, just as a rights-based approach identifies the rights-

holders, it should also identify the duty-bearers, those who are responsible for protecting and fulfilling these rights. Duty-bearers are mostly governments, NGOs, individuals, local organizations, authorities, private companies and international institutions. The fourth principle demands that the reported opinions should not cause a risk for refugees and their well-being. Finally, a rights-based approach to journalism should empower the rights-holder, give voice to them, let them express their concerns and needs and contribute to the enhancement of their capacities to claim their rights.

The rights-based approach to journalism has benefits to empower and promote the rights of all individuals; however, this approach may produce some unwanted effects, particularly for refugees. It is explained above that when

refugees are represented and perceived as helpless victims in need, it becomes easier to raise empathy and acceptance for their presence and stay in the country. This emotional and humanitarian approach has significant benefits, for

example, when the Turkish government opened the borders to Syrians and asked for hospitality and understanding from the Turkish community to help our “guests” and “brothers.” A rights-based approach proposing that these are people with rights might not have produced the same impact and the same positive emotions such as sympathy, which led the Turkish people to act with great responsibility and benevolence. This is to suggest that when reporting on refugees, the benefits and the outcomes of the rights-based approach and the emotional/humanitarian approach should be taken into consideration and, where necessary, they should both be put to work in the service of fostering a socially cohesive society. It is clear that the rights-based journalism approach is necessary to raise respect and understanding for refugees, whereas a humanitarian/emotional approach is beneficial for evoking positive feelings of compassion toward one another.

## Conclusion

While debating about the best solutions for the future of Syrians in Turkey, we should also discuss ways of coexisting in peace during the time we live together. The opinions and feelings that Syrian and Turkish communities hold toward each other are the most important elements that organize the social interactions between them and contribute to a peaceful or conflictual coexistence. A big part of public perception is fed by media representations.

This study has discussed in what ways media representations of refugees promote their inclusion or exclusion in society, leading to well-functioning or conflicting social relationship between groups.

The media's representation practices work in various and complex ways toward the exclusion of refugees. The study has identified and discussed the ways in which stereotypical refugee representations produce effects of victimization, depoliticization, dehumanization, marginalization, homogenization and de-individualization of refugees. These effects of media portrayals stigmatize refugees as "other" in different ways and work against their inclusion and acceptance in society, thus playing a role toward the emergence of social conflict between refugee and host communities.

On the other hand, the media may also challenge the stigmatized identity of the refugee. When the media function to motivate empathy and understanding between communities, they highlight the ordinariness of refugees and depict their similarities with non-refugees by portraying them, for example, as people who once were members of a happy family who had a happy life just like us. Such representations remind the public that numbers or various labels, such as floods or terrorists, do not define refugees; they are people whose lives have fallen apart due to circumstances they are not responsible for. Thus, representing

refugees as ordinary people produces an effect of empathizing with them and facilitates acceptance toward them. Also, representing refugees from a rights-based journalism approach reminds the public that we, as the signatories of certain conventions, have responsibilities toward people who cannot return to their country safely. While perceiving refugees and justifying their inclusion from an emotional and humanitarian approach (rather than a rights-based approach) may help to raise empathy, also being aware that they are people with certain rights under the state's protection may help raise respect toward them, which is also essential for their well-being.

**While perceiving refugees and justifying their inclusion from an emotional and humanitarian approach (rather than a rights-based approach) may help to raise empathy, also being aware that they are people with certain rights under the state's protection may help raise respect toward them, which is also essential for their well-being.**

Consequently, this study has discussed that the media are both a problem, because their effects directly or indirectly produce prejudice, exclusion and conflict toward those who are perceived as 'others;' while they are also part

of the solution because their portrayals of people facilitate understanding, inclusion and cohesion, and provide people with motives to live together across their differences and through their commonalities. In a world in which people are forced to leave their countries for different reasons, seeking ways to exist together in peace is a social responsibility for all.

## Endnotes

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