

## Syrian Asylum Seekers as Political Factors and Their Effects on Local Politics

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### Abstract

The influx to Turkey amidst the 2011 Syrian civil war has significantly affected the Syrian and Turkish communities socially and economically. It can be claimed that this major Syrian existence among Turkish society, has the potential to be a factor, especially in local politics and the political choices of Turkish citizens. The study focuses on 12 provinces of Turkey where the ratio of Syrian asylum seekers to the population of the province is the highest in Turkey. The main subject of this study is the function of Syrian asylum seekers in structuring Turkey's local politics. Within this context and based on the last two local elections in Turkey, election manifests and speeches of political parties and mayoral candidates are analyzed on the axis of Syrian asylum seekers. Also, the distinctive role of the presence of Syrian asylum seekers and political discourse about them in the political choices of Turkish voters is presented argumentatively. In this study, data obtained through content analysis is analyzed within a comparative framework, and in consequence, the functions of Syrian asylum seekers as political factors in structuring local politics are evaluated.

**Keywords:** *Syrian Asylum Seekers, Local Politics, Local Administrations, Local Elections, Political Choices*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Migration, which can be defined as the movement of individuals or groups of people from one place to another for various reasons, is a phenomenon that has been frequently observed in the life of societies throughout history and continues to be observed. Apart from its type, intensity, and causes, different cultures and societies interact as a result of migration especially when it occurs on an international scale (Parlak & Şahin, 2019, p. 40). Although it is known that in the historical process, immigrants tend to reach similar cultures, especially in economic migration; this tendency becomes a concern about life when immigrants are involuntarily displaced (Parlak & Şahin, 2019, p. 40). Within these kinds of situations, the primary objective of people living in war or conflict zones is to reach regions where they think they can find safety as quickly as possible (Parlak & Şahin, 2019, p. 40).

Diverse communal consequences emerge as a result of the type, intensity, and causes of migration. These social economic, cultural, and political consequences tend to create negative effects on the communal attitude of immigrant-receiving societies. According to Castles and Miller (2008, p. 20), migrants are facing strong reactions from some sections of immigrant-receiving societies in the face of economic restructuring and far-reaching social changes created by migration. Immigrants are often seen as the cause of insecurity and unemployment, and they are also blamed for pushing up housing prices and overloading social services, crime, and diseases (Castles & Miller, 2008, p. 20).

Concerning the Castles and Miller's (2008, p. 18) profile of immigrants, it is seen that immigrants are mostly coming from societies with different traditions and religions, speak different languages, possess different cultures, physical appearances, and clothing styles, and generally work at low-class jobs and settle in among low-income. These differences create a sense of perceived threat for both societies and usually result in the development of negative attitudes towards immigrants among hosting societies.

As an example, findings of the European Social Survey (2002-2016)<sup>1</sup> indicate that European societies are in a tendency to accept immigrants who share similar roots with them, are well-educated and highly qualified, have a high level of welfare, can speak the language, and are familiar with the lifestyle of the country of destination. However, the European societies also think that immigrants worsen the crime problem in the host countries and the Europeans are skeptical about whether the immigrants are making their host countries more livable and contributing to their economy (Şahin, 2018, p. 65).

Hence, according to the findings of yet another research conducted in 2016; over half of the Europeans (59%) think that the refugees are increasing the likelihood of terrorism and half of the Europeans (50%) believe that refugees also create economic burdens as they are taking Europeans' jobs

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about European Social Survey visit <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

and social opportunities (Pew Research Center, 2016, pp. 3-12). According to 30% of the Europeans, refugees are responsible for crimes in European countries and 36.7% of them believe that the existence of diverse ethnic groups makes those countries worse places to live in (Pew Research Center, 2016, pp. 3-12).

According to Tunç (2015, pp. 42-46), findings indicate that Turkish society's behaviors against Syrians are similar to this universal profile. Turkish society also maintains a distance from asylum seekers and various demographic concerns arise among the society (Tunç, 2015, pp. 42-46). Concerns about unemployment and loss of income prevail and as well as economic concerns centered around constantly rising house rental pricings (Tunç, 2015, pp. 42-46). Moreover, asylum seekers are perceived as the cause of some diseases and crimes leading to a state of distrust towards them. (Tunç, 2015, pp. 42-46)<sup>2</sup>.

When we consider the findings of these studies, we can understand that the negative attitudes developed against immigrants, asylum seekers, or refugees occasionally turn into anti-immigrant movements ranging from expressions of dissent and political criticism to violent actions and racist attacks. Especially due to the perception that migration and immigrants are negatively affecting the labor market, real estate and rental market, deliverance of health services, and public security, anti-immigrant attitudes rise in the host society because these issues are able to directly affect the daily life of the host society.

The findings of a recent study also support this inference. The findings of a study conducted across Turkey by the Social Democracy Foundation (2021, pp. 11-13) suggest that the voters who voted for AK Party, CHP, MHP, IYI Party, and HDP in the Turkish General Elections in 2018 are defining the Syrians in Turkey as a burden and source of possible future problems. Besides, the common opinion of all of the voters is that the Syrians should return to their country (Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), 2021, pp. 11-13).

According to these recent findings, it can be understood that the main concerns held are about economic issues and continually rising crime rates in Turkish society. For example, 67.1% of the research participants have a negative view of Syrian business owners in Turkey arguing that Syrians do not pay taxes, that they will be permanent and, that they will steal the opportunities of the Turks (Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), 2021, p. 38). When this finding is distributed over the voters then the voters of CHP, MHP, and IYI Party are against the business opening of Syrians by a minimum rate

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<sup>2</sup> The findings indicated in these studies since 2011 refer to the general opinion about the Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey. However, these findings are mostly based on the attitudes developed in Turkish society against Syrians. But the negativity related to Syrians in many studies about healthcare, education, public security etc. does not reflect the real situation when the official data is taken into consideration. For more information, see (Şahin, 2018).

of 80% (Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), 2021, p. 38). It is seen that this rate is 59.6% among AK Party voters and 52.3% among HDP voters (Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), 2021, p. 38).

Findings of participating in the labor force also coincide with the findings of business startups. 62.8% of the research participants have a negative view of Syrians participating in labor life stating that they should return to their country and work there, wages will decrease, they will be permanent in Turkey and, they will take away the jobs of Turks (Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), 2021, pp. 41-43). When these findings were distributed to voters, 54% of AK Party voters, 79.9% of CHP voters, 66.7% of MHP voters, 83.7% of IYI Party voters and, 62.6% of HDP voters are against Syrians' participation in the labor force (Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), 2021, pp. 41-43).

Hence more than 60% of voters who are the participants of this study share a common opinion that Syrians are negatively affecting the Turkish economy and raising apartment rents (Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), 2021, pp. 78-83). Besides, more than 50% of the participants share concerns about the increase in crime rates and conflicts (Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), 2021, pp. 78-83).

In this context, the emergence of anti-immigration attitudes in the host society should be manifested in political choices; in other words, the local and national political powers that produce and carry out the current immigration policy should be expected to be warned, especially through elections. In this regard, two hypotheses are proposed: Voters' political choices are formed around their ideological commitments and individual interests and, the existence of Syrian asylum seekers is not a factor to dissolve the ideologically motivated commitments of the voters to political parties.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The population of Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey has constantly increased since the start of the Civil War in Syria in 2011. Although the population of Turkey also increased within the same years, the ratio of Syrian asylum seekers to the population of Turkey has been over 4% since 2017. Based on these ratios, this study focuses on 12 provinces of Turkey where the ratio of Syrian asylum seekers to the population of the province exceeds the ratio of Syrian asylum seekers to the population of Turkey.

Because 10 of these 12 provinces are also metropolitan municipalities, results of the elections for both the metropolitan municipality mayorships and the metropolitan city council memberships have been analyzed based on the mayoral candidates and the political parties. For the other two provinces which are not metropolitan municipalities (Kilis and Osmaniye), results of the elections for the municipal mayorships and the provincial assembly memberships have been analyzed with respect to the candidates and the political parties. Additionally, the results of the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections held in 2018 have been analyzed for these 12 provinces so as to cross-check the findings.

Data indicating the results of the elections were collected from various publicly available press releases, which were also published based on the official results announced by the Supreme Election

Council<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, discourses of political parties which are seeking for national and regional power and speeches and pledges of the mayoral candidates in 2014 and 2019 elections are analyzed on the axis of Syrian asylum seekers via election manifestos of the political parties.

### 3. POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF TURKEY

Although Turkey's history of democracy can be traced back to the constitutional period of the Ottoman Empire, the multi-party political life in the modern Republican era started with the elections held in 1946. 1946 election was the first occasion in which Turkey experienced a multi-party election in which two main ideological rivals competed.

Before the 1946 elections, the socio-political environment in Turkey consisted of two opposite sides: well-organized political elites that occupy the center and heterogeneous peripheral formations united in their opposition to the power elite. The political representatives of this structure were the Republican People's Party in the center and the Democrat Party in the periphery (Akgün, 2000, p. 79). The antagonism between these two pioneers of the newly established multi-party political life also predetermined Turkey's political and ideological scenery after 1946. Especially until the military coup held in 1980, the peripheral political movements have always been regarded (?) as the successor of the Democrat Party. And in the '90s, many new political parties with many new political tendencies based on religious, nationalist, and ethnic ideologies started to grow in the political life of Turkey (Akgün, 2000, pp. 79-80).

The multi-party political life in Turkish democracy and the newly emerged dynamics in politics have naturally affected the relations in Turkish society. The intra-country rural-urban migration movements accelerated from 1960's onwards, and unplanned urbanization and local compatriotic relations were established following those movements. The economic crises and political instability that occurred in the post-1980 period were the main reasons for the social reaction which deeply affected the political choices after the 2000s (Bayburt, 2021, pp. 26-27). Thus, the same political party is governing Turkey since 2002.

In today's political world of Turkey, there are five main actors. *AK Party*, whose initial political definition can be made as a mass-party that pursues politics along conservative democratic lines, is a structure embodied on the ground of social reactivity. In that context, AK Party can be regarded as a product of the public's loss of trust in other political parties at the central right and central left in the new millennium, whose politics have been similar since the beginning of the multi-party democratic life in Turkey. At the beginning of the 2000s, many people who lost faith politically and economically perceived AK Party as a new future.

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<sup>3</sup> The official results of the elections published in the Official Gazette by the Supreme Election Council include consolidated data of Turkey. But because it is needed to analyze the results by provinces for this study, the data were collected from various media institutions.

AK Party defined itself economically “neoliberal”, politically “libertarian reformist” and ideologically “conservative democrat” in its early periods (Tepe, 2010, pp. 151-152). In the meantime, it had been observed that the AK Party headquarters has also shown a particular sensitivity to avoid being associated with “Islamist” characterization.

After the military coup attempt on 15 July 2016 was repulsed, it is observed that the AK Party completely abandoned its liberal/libertarian rhetoric in the political field, which had begun to erode slowly before, and preferred a more security-oriented, state-centered political language. It is possible to state that the "Public's Alliance" established with the Nationalist Movement Party and the "Presidential Government System" implemented by replacing the parliamentary regime reinforce this political language. Erdoğan, who was elected president in 2014, has become the primary political actor with a decisive role in the domestic and foreign politics of the country, with the new system passed in 2018.

On the other hand, the origins of the *Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)*, which gained its current institutional identity in 1969, can be traced back to the Republican Villagers Nation Party, which was founded in 1958. The process started when Alparslan Türkeş<sup>4</sup>, the leader of the movement, who had charismatic authority and was known as the "Basbuğ"<sup>5</sup>, and his friends joined the Republican Villagers Nation Party in 1965 and gained intra-party power within a short time, resulted in the change of the name of the party to the "Nationalist Movement Party" in the Adana Congress held in February 1969.

The program of the MHP, led by Türkeş, was dominated by anti-communist and anti-liberal rhetoric, focusing on Turkish nationalism in every field from politics to economy. The party program, called “the Nine Lights Doctrine” and written by Türkeş, has been the main determinant of the MHP's policy-making and administration. In addition, the party management has implemented a model of thought known as the "Turkish-Islamic Ideal" by merging Turkish nationalism with Islamist values.

In the congress held after the unexpected death of Türkeş as a result of a heart attack in 1997, Devlet Bahçeli<sup>6</sup>, who continues his duty today, was elected as the chairman and the party became the government partner by achieving second place in the general elections held in 1999.

The MHP, led by Bahçeli, which attracted attention with its harsh and sharp oppositional rhetoric against the AK Party from its coming to power in 2002 until 2016. But after 2016, the MHP has shifted its rhetorical position and preferred to stand by Erdoğan with the discourse of "the survival of the state", which is considered one of the indispensable arguments of the traditional politics of the party,

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<sup>4</sup> Retired soldier/politician, born in 1917. He took an active part in the Military Coup on May 27, 1960 with the rank of staff colonel, and led the Turkish nationalism-based political line known as the "Ülkücü Movement" and its institutional representative, the Nationalist Movement Party, until 1997, when he stepped into his political life in 1965. He also served as deputy prime minister (1975-77, 1977-78) twice during his political career.

<sup>5</sup> Phrase meaning "commander in chief" in Turkish history.

<sup>6</sup> Academician/politician born in 1948. He has been the chairman of the Nationalist Movement Party since 1997 and served as the deputy prime minister between 1999-2002.

after the 15 July military coup attempt. and became the other major partner in the formation of the "Public's Alliance".

The *Republican People's Party (CHP)* has a different position in the historical context when compared to other parties in Turkish politics. It emerged as a political structure founded by the military-civil bureaucratic elite, which mainly led the national struggle against the occupying forces and subsequently had the grand share in the establishment of the modern nation-state.

Following the mid-1990s, the CHP, under the leadership of Deniz Baykal, portrayed a party that could not get rid of its perceived identity as a chronic opposition party, and according to some political circles, it did not want to do so. As a policy, it is possible to say that it was drifting in a more state-centered, nationalist direction rather than a line that centers the economically disadvantaged segments of the people. Its voter base is largely composed of urbanized and educated segments of the society belonging to the middle and upper-income brackets.

Although the party went through a paradigm shift with Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's<sup>7</sup>, taking the office after Deniz Baykal in 2010, and aimed to reach all segments of society, it is difficult to say that it achieved a meaningful success until the local elections held in March 2019. Despite this, it is observed that the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu reached a wider electorate compared to the Baykal period. In this process, relations with the poor living in metropolises and groups that feel excluded due to identity, gender, etc. have become even tighter. Since 2018, the party has established the "Nation's Alliance" with the IYI Party.

*IYI Party*, which was founded in October 2017 by Meral Akşener<sup>8</sup> and her followers, can be read as a direct and institutional outcome of the power struggle within the MHP since 2015. As a result of the general elections held in November 2015, the MHP's position as the fourth party by obtaining 40 deputies in the parliament mobilized those who were not satisfied with Devlet Bahçeli and his administration, and Meral Akşener announced her candidacy for the general presidency in this direction.

In light of all those developments, serious ruptures took place within the MHP under the leadership of groups opposing the policies implemented by the leader Devlet Bahçeli. Especially the MHP's rapprochement with the AK Party after 2016 caused serious intra-party objections and the process ended with the establishment of the IYI Party.

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<sup>7</sup> Bureaucrat, politician, born in 1948. Between 1992-96 and 1997-99, he served as the General Director of the Social Security Institution, entered the parliament in 2002 by entering politics from the CHP, and has been the chairman of the CHP since 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Academic, politician, born in 1956. Raised from a family with a nationalist view, his older brother Nihat Güreer became one of the well-known and influential figures in the MHP and the idealist movement. In the mid-1990s, he started active politics in the True Path Party, which was one of the important actors in the centre-right politics of that period, and undertook the duty of interior minister between 1996-97. Although he took part in the "Innovators" movement with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül in 2001, he left there due to some disagreements and joined the MHP. Since 2017, he has been the chairman of the IYI Party, which he founded.

As a political discourse, in the IYI Party, which appeals to the secular, urban, and educated nationalist segments of the MHP electorate who are generally dissatisfied with Bahçeli's political style, an effort to become a center-right party aiming to reach a wider audience under the leadership of Akşener is observed.

It is known that Kurdish politicians who define themselves on the left of the political spectrum in Turkey during the 1960s, in a political environment where left/socialist influences exhibited some strength in the political life of Turkey, were engaged in politics under the umbrella of formations such as the People's Republic Party and the Workers' Party of Turkey. This situation continued for a long time.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Kurdish politics started to institutionalize independently on a legal scale, and the process that started with the People's Labor Party continues today with the *Peoples' Democratic Party* (HDP), which was founded in 2012. This political tradition, which became politically active by winning the metropolitan and district municipalities in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia Region, where mostly Kurds live, started to make its voice heard strongly on a national scale with the election of HDP co-chairman Selahattin Demirtaş<sup>9</sup>. Gaining a certain momentum with the moderate left rhetoric adopted by Demirtaş compared to previous periods, HDP reached a remarkable 13.1% of votes in the general elections held in June 2015.

Although the HDP's political agenda includes asylum seekers, homosexuals, women, and poor classes seeking rights, it is possible to say that the phenomenon they define as the "Kurdish problem" is still strong at the center of their political discourse and is equally determinant.

The dynamic political life in Turkey is also affecting the voting behavior of the voters. According to the findings of many studies (Bayburt, 2021; Erdoğan, 2004; Çinko, 2006; Akgün, 2000), voters in Turkey are mostly determining their political choices rationally concerning economic circumstances. Bayburt (2021, p. 39) states that, especially after an economic crisis period, voters are behaving rationally and determining their political preferences concerning their economic circumstances. Erdoğan (2004, p. 105) also states that in the periods of elections, macroeconomic indicators are more important than the ideological preferences for voters, and voters decide for whom to vote according to those macroeconomic indicators. Çinko (2006, pp. 111-114) mentions that in countries where economic problems worsen, factors related to these economic problems have a decisive effect on voting behavior, and in Turkey, the negative macro-economic policies of the government are also affecting the political choices of the voters. Çinko (2006, pp. 111-114) also states that low-income

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<sup>9</sup> Lawyer, politician, born in 1973. He was the co-chairman of the Peace and Democracy Party between 2010-14 and the Peoples' Democratic Party between 2014-2018. He served in the parliament as a deputy in the 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections. He was sentenced to prison on charges of "establishing an organization for the purpose of committing a crime", "being a member of a terrorist organization", "being a member of an armed terrorist organization", "committing a crime on behalf of a terrorist organization" and has been living in prison since 2016.



voters are preferring opportunist policies that are raising financial support for themselves. According to Akgün (2000, pp. 89-90), voters pursue their economic interests by acting pragmatically.

#### **4. FACTORS AFFECTING ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR AND THE ROLE OF FORCED MIGRATION**

In representative democracies, elections are the most important way of people's participation in the governmental policies (Beetham & Boyle, 2010, p. 376). There are many factors affecting people's political choices while they are electing their representatives within the democratic participation opportunities. According to Kışlalı (2011, p. 275), voters' political choices are affected not only by their self-interests but also by the demand for security, the demand of respectability, emotional commitment, and religious and political beliefs. For example, it can be observed that the effects of local influences on voting preferences decrease while the effects of social classes on voting preferences increase according to the transition from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy, in other words, from traditional society to modern society. Those whose experience a decrease in their share of the income distribution tend to have more nationalistic and religious political preferences. Also, violence and security concerns cause the voters to act conservatively in their political choices (Kışlalı, 2011, p. 275).

Concerning some other studies (Antunes, 2010; Aydoğan Ünal, 2016; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) on voting behavior, it can be understood that several factors are affecting the voters' decisions about their political preferences. These factors could be based on ideological or rational grounds, Other grounds such as the social environment of individuals, the social capital of individuals, and the pragmatic and rational evaluations of individuals can also affect the political preferences of voters.

When these factors are reanalyzed with respect to the hypotheses of this study, one can claim that the population of asylum seekers settled in a country because of forced migration, would also saliently affect the political preferences of voters in the host country. Hence, the findings of many studies (Barone, D'Ignazio, de Blasio, & Naticchioni, 2016; Otto & Steinhardt, 2014; Dustmann, Vasilijeva, & Damm, 2016; Vasilakis, 2017) show that the rise of extreme nationalist tendencies in the last years especially in the welfare states of the Global North is mostly related to the population of immigrants in these countries.

For instance, Barone et.al (2016) found that in Italy, voters living in the districts where many immigrants are settled, have a tendency towards central right political parties depending on the cultural differences and the competition in accessing the labor market and public services. Also, according to the findings of their research conducted in Hamburg, Germany, Otto and Steinhardt (2014) revealed that the growing population of foreigners has a significant effect on the political success of extreme-right political parties in Germany.

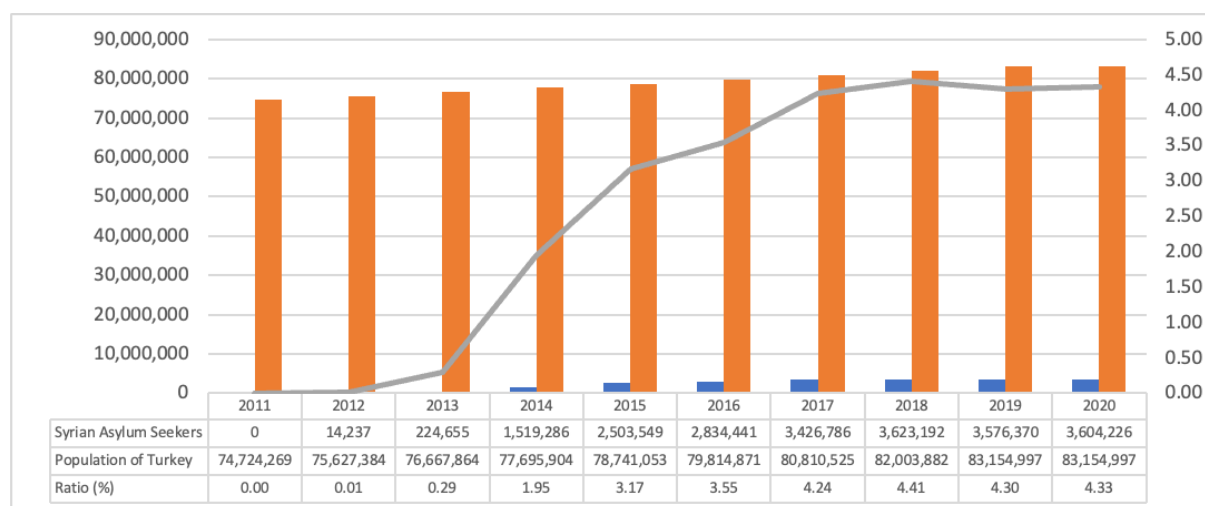
Dustmann et.al has also reached similar results. Regarding their research conducted in Denmark, they have stated that the growth in the population of refugees is the cause of the increase of the votes of not only the anti-immigrant parties but also the center-right parties both in local and general elections. Also, with regard to the concern about the financial effects of refugees, this tendency towards right wing political discourses seems stronger in especially rural municipalities which are wealthier, where the working-age population is higher and much more refugees have settled (Dustmann, Vasilijeva, & Damm, 2016). Besides Vasilakis (2017) states that the population of Syrian asylum seekers in the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea is the reason for the increase of votes for the Golden Dawn Party in Greece, which is known for its Neo-Nazi political views.

### 5. STATISTICS ABOUT SYRIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS IN TURKEY AND ECONOMIC INDICATORS IN THE SAME PERIOD

A grassroots movement called the Arab Spring started in 2010 in Northern Africa and then spread to Syria, the southern neighbor of Turkey in 2011. As a result of the civil war in Syria, millions of Syrians had to flee from their country and seek refuge in neighboring countries. According to UNHCR (2021), 3,701,584 of 5,635,057 Syrian asylum seekers (65.7% of Syrian asylum seekers in the world) are settled in Turkey.

The population of Syrian asylum seekers has continuously grown since 2011 when the entries started in Turkey. According to the data from the Directorate General of Migration Management, the ratio of Syrian asylum seekers to the population of Turkey is 4.33% in July 2020 and 4.30% in 2019 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** The Ratio of Syrian Asylum Seekers to the Population of Turkey by Years (2011-2020)



**Source:** (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2020; Turkish Statistical Institute, 2020)

There are 12 provinces in Turkey where ratios of the asylum seekers in Turkey exceed this percentage based on the overall ratio of Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey to the population of Turkey during election periods, which are the subject of the study, (Table 1).

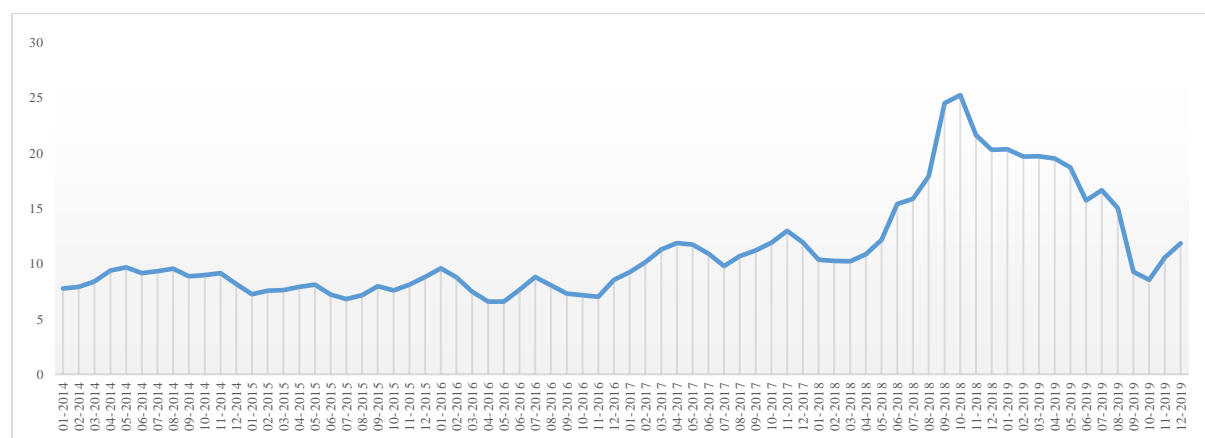
**Table 1.** Provinces of Turkey Where the Ratio of Syrian Asylum Seekers to the Population of the Province Exceeds the Ratio of the Syrian Asylum Seekers to the Population of Turkey

Province	2018			2020		
	Number of Registered Asylum Seekers	Population of the Province	Ratio (%)	Number of Registered Asylum Seekers	Population of the Province	Ratio (%)
Adana	202,676	2,216,475	9.14	248,374	2,237,940	11.10
Bursa	148,077	2,936,803	5.04	176,628	3,056,120	5.78
Gaziantep	384,285	2,005,515	19.16	452,135	2,069,364	21.80
Hatay	445,095	1,575,226	28.26	435,297	1,628,894	26.72
Kahramanmaraş	100,346	1,127,623	8.90	91,135	1,154,102	7.97
Kayseri	74,524	1,376,722	5.41	77,181	1,407,409	5.48
Kilis	131,109	136,319	96.18	109,577	142,490	76.90
Konya	107,515	2,180,149	4.93	115,127	2,232,374	5.16
Mardin	92,846	809,719	11.47	88,769	838,778	10.58
Mersin	208,139	1,793,931	11.60	214,920	1,840,425	11.68
Osmaniye	54,555	527,724	10.34	48,363	538,759	8.98
Şanlıurfa	475,782	1,985,753	23.96	420,867	2,073,614	20.30

**Source:** (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2018; Directorate General of Migration Management, 2020)

As stated in the findings of various studies on voter preferences in Turkey mentioned above, voters' voting behavior runs parallel with their economic interests and economic wealth is a determining factor in their choices. Hence, it is important also to analyze the changes in the economic indicators such as inflation and unemployment rates after 2014 when the population of Syrian asylum seekers exceeded one million people in Turkey as those indicators are in a direct relation with daily life.

**Figure 2.** 2014-2019 Consumer Price Index (Year to Year % Changes)

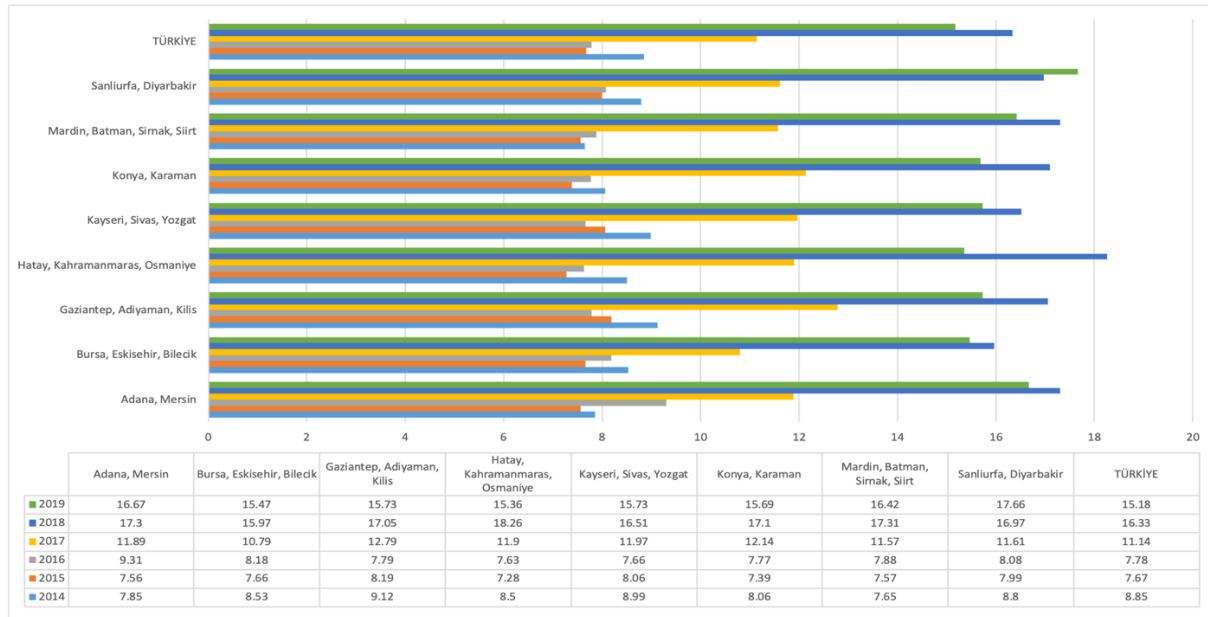


**Source:** The graphic is prepared by the authors according to the data of (The Central Bank of The Republic of Turkey, 2021)

For instance, when the Consumer Price Index between January 2014 and December 2019 is analyzed, it is understood that inflation is increasing after January 2017 and this increase accelerated after May 2018 (Figure 2). Thus, the inflation rate which is 10.85% in April 2018 has increased to 25.24% in October 2018 according to the Turkish Central Bank.

When the Consumer Price Index is analyzed according to the statistical data of the provinces which are the subjects of this study and the statistical regions where these provinces are located, according to the 12-month averages, it is understood that Consumer Price Index is 1.5-2% below or above the national average. Especially, only the regional inflation in Bursa, Bilecik, and Eskişehir regions is below the national average in 2018, when the national inflation increase has significantly accelerated (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Consumer Price Index (12-month Average) of the Provinces (2014-2019)

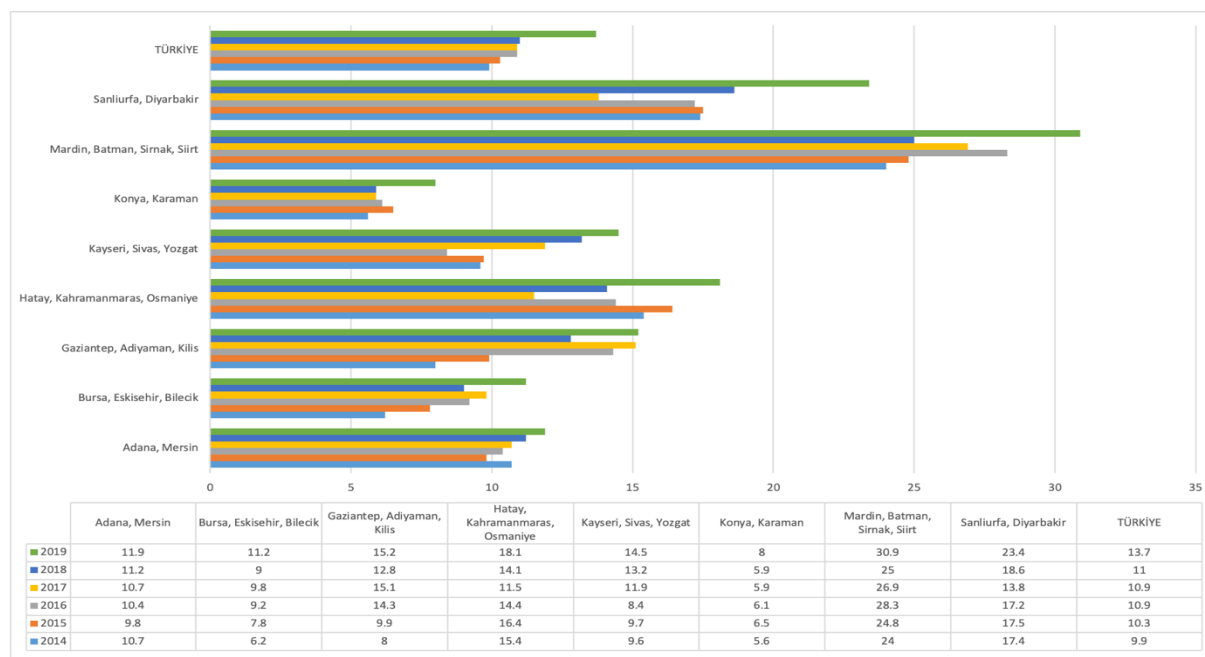


**Source:** The graphic is prepared by the authors according to the data of (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2021).

Turkey national unemployment has also increased continuously between 2014 and 2019. The national unemployment rate which was 9.9% in 2014 has increased to 11% by 2018 and 13.7% by 2019 (Figure 4).

But when the unemployment rates of Turkey are analyzed on a regional scale, it is understood that the annual change in unemployment rates differ from the annual change of inflation. For example, the regional unemployment rate of the Konya and Karaman statistical regions is below the national average of Turkey between 2014 and 2019. But the regional unemployment rates of the statistical regions encircling Gaziantep, Kilis, Hatay, Osmaniye, Kahramanmaraş, Mardin, and Şanlıurfa provinces are above the national average of Turkey between 2014 and 2019, occasionally doubling the nation-wide unemployment rate. (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** National and Provincial Unemployment Rates (2014-2019)



**Source:** The graphic is prepared by the authors according to the data of (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2021).

## 6. FINDINGS

According to the comparative analysis of the results of local elections held in 2014 and 2019 on the axis of 12 provinces mentioned in Table 1, candidates of the same political parties won the mayorship elections in nine provinces, and in one province the same candidate won in 2019 (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Mayorship Election Results by Provinces (2014-2019)

Province	2014 Local Elections		2019 Local Elections		Change
	Winning Political Party	Vote Rate (%)	Winning Political Party	Vote Rate (%)	
Adana	MHP	33.51	CHP - Nation's Alliance	53.25	Yes
Bursa	AK Party	49.52	AK Party - Public's Alliance	49.60	No
Gaziantep	AK Party	54.57	AK Party - Public's Alliance	53.99	No
Hatay	CHP	41.01	CHP - Nation's Alliance	55.21	No
Kahramanmaraş	AK Party	58.82	AK Party - Public's Alliance	67.56	No
Kayseri	AK Party	58.91	AK Party - Public's Alliance	63.40	No
Kilis	AK Party	50.83	AK Party	47.26	No
Konya	AK Party	64.26	AK Party - Public's Alliance	70.69	No
Mardin	Independent	52.20	HDP	55.86	Yes, but the same candidate has won
Mersin	MHP	31.95	CHP - Nation's Alliance	45.30	Yes
Osmaniye	MHP	47.34	MHP - Public's Alliance	54.43	No
Şanlıurfa	AK Party	61.63	AK Party - Public's Alliance	60.72	No

**Source:** (Yeni Şafak, 2020a)

The results of the provincial assembly membership elections and the metropolitan city council elections are also similar to the election results of mayorships. In this regard, the majority of both the provincial assembly and the metropolitan city council memberships are won by the same political party which has won the mayorship in the same province (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Vote Rate Distribution of Provincial Assembly Memberships and Metropolitan City Council Memberships by Provinces (2014-2019)

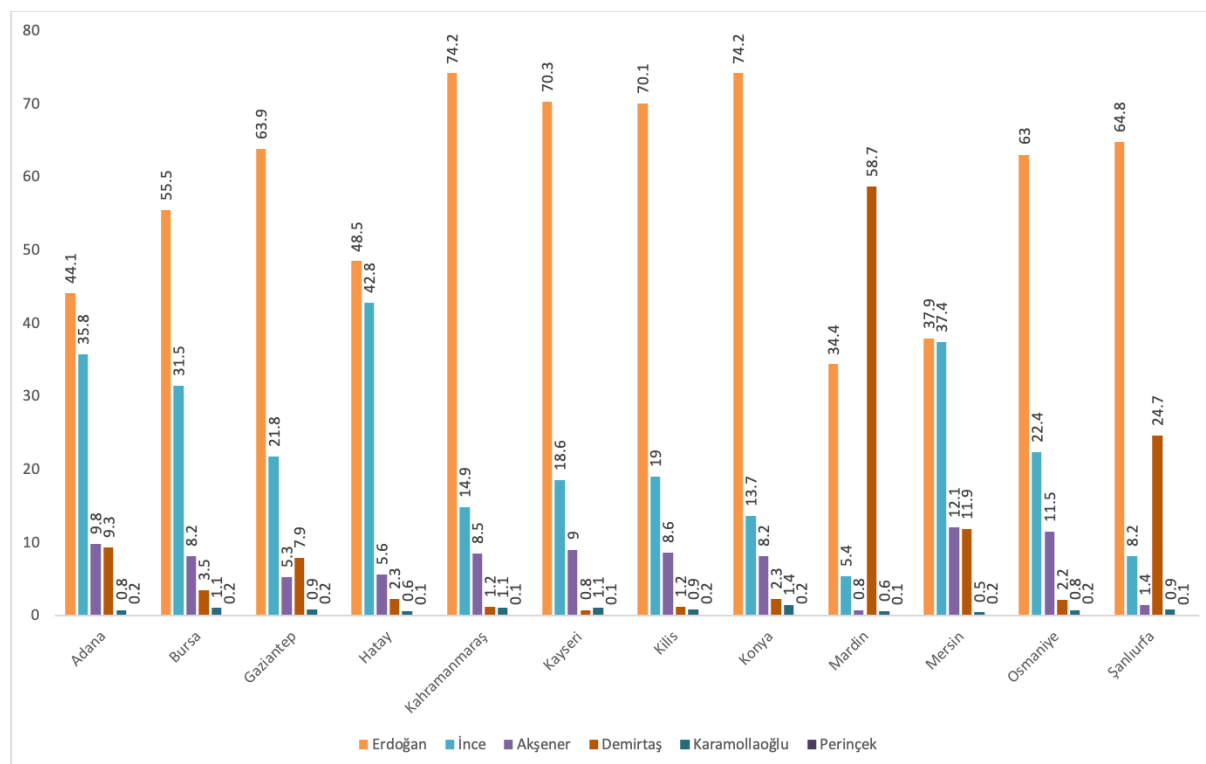
Province	Political Party	Vote Rate in 2014 (%)	Vote Rate in 2019 (%)	Province	Political Party	Vote Rate in 2014 (%)	Vote Rate in 2019 (%)
Adana	CHP	26.5	40.4	Konya	AK Party	60.8	63.2
	AK Party	30.6	25.5		IYI Party	0	13.5
	MHP	29.6	18.2		CHP	6.6	8.7
	IYI Party	0	4.8		BBP	1.3	5.3
	HDP	0	4.1		SP	6	3.9
	SP	1.3	3.1		Independent	0	1.7
	BBP	0.8	1.5		MHP	21.9	1.3
	DP	1.3	0.7		HDP	2.2	1.1
	Independent	8.1	0.4				
Bursa	AK Party	45.3	49	Mardin	HDP	52.3	54.7
	CHP	25.9	34		AK Party	34.2	36.7
	IYI Party	0	7.4		CHP	1.5	2.3
	SP	3.4	3.2		SP	6.5	2
	DP	1.5	1.6		IYI Party	0	1.4
	HDP	0	1.4		Independent	0	1.2
	BBP	0.7	1.3	Mersin	CHP	28.3	37.5
	MHP	20	0.9		MHP	31.1	30.5
G.anteop	AK Party	52	52.7	Mersin	IYI Party	0	11.1
	CHP	21.1	19.1		AK Party	26.6	8.5
	IYI Party	0	12.3		HDP	10.9	6.3
	DSP	0	6.2		DP	0.5	4.2
	HDP	6.3	3.1	Şanlıurfa	AK Party	54.1	53
	SP	3	1.9		HDP	26.4	20.7
	BBP	1.4	1.6		SP	6.4	14
	MHP	13.5	1.5		CHP	1.2	4
DP	1.7	0.7	DP	3.7	3		
K.maraş	AK Party	56.8	61.5	MHP	4.8	2.3	
	IYI Party	0	19	IYI Party	0	1.6	
	BBP	2.1	6.3	Kilis	AK Party	51.88	47.1
	CHP	8.1	6		MHP	33.07	29.4
	SP	2.2	2.2		CHP	7.08	4.8
	MHP	29	1.7		BBP	2.77	0.2
	DSP	0	1.3		BTP	2.65	0.6
Hatay	CHP	34.4	37.6		SP	1.1	1.9
	AK Party	39.1	37.3		Independent	1.1	1.6
	IYI Party	0	8.4	IYI Party	-	13.3	
	MHP	19.3	5.6	Osmaniye	MHP	43.7	34.4
	DSP	0.2	3.2		AKP	37.6	31.7
	SP	1.6	2.4		CHP	13.1	14.9
	DP	0	2.3		IYI Party	-	13.5
	BBP	0.5	1.5		SP	1.7	1.5
HDP	0	1.1	HDP		0	1.5	
Kayseri	AK Party	55.5	58				
	IYI Party	0	16.5				
	CHP	9.7	11.6				
	BBP	2.8	5.9				
	SP	2.4	4				
	MHP	28.6	2.3				

Source: (Yeni Şafak, 2020b)

When the data mentioned in Table 2 and Table 3 are analyzed together, it is seen that the political parties, which have won both mayorship and majority in assemblies or councils, increased their vote rate in 2019 in most of the provinces compared to the 2014 results. However, vote rates of winning candidates/parties in mayoral elections decreased by 0.58% in Gaziantep, by 3.57% in Kilis, and by 0.91% in Şanlıurfa, and vote rates of winning candidates/parties in assembly or council memberships also decreased by 1.1% in Şanlıurfa, by 4.78% in Kilis, and by 9.3% in Osmaniye.

Findings indicate that the political tendency of these 12 provinces in general elections held in 2018 is also similar to the political tendency in local elections. According to the results of the Presidential Elections held in 2018, the distribution of voting rates coincides with the results of local elections held in 2019, except for Adana and Hatay (Figure 5).

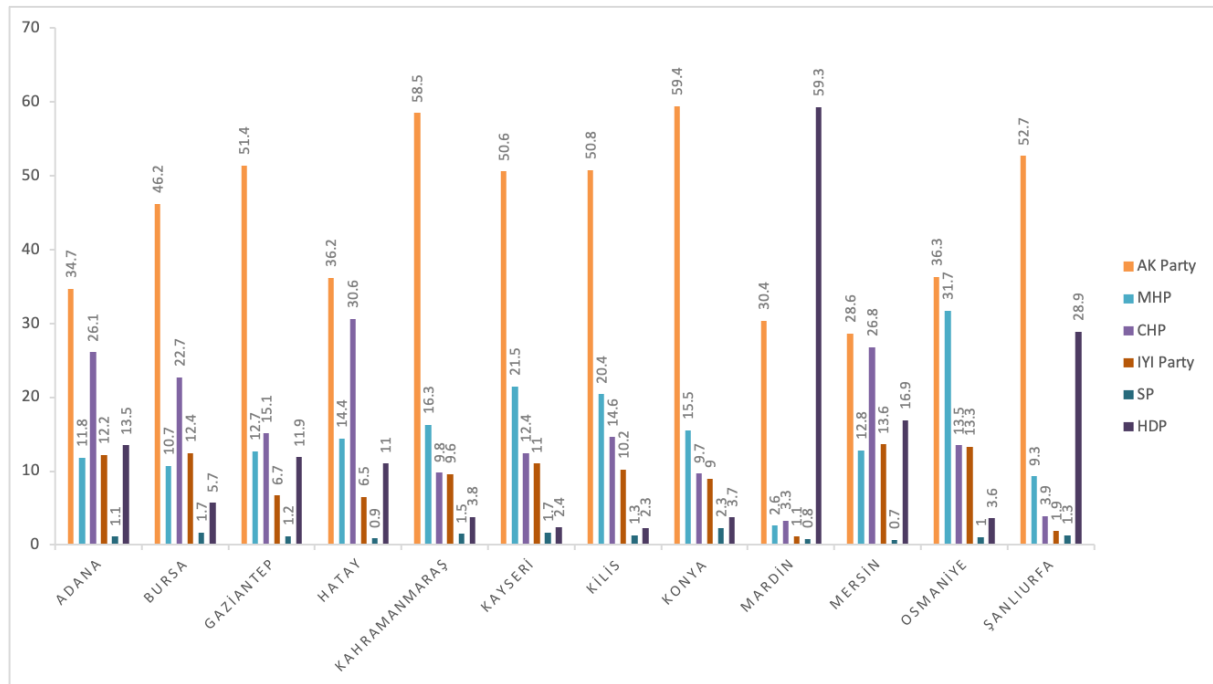
**Figure 5.** Vote Rate Distribution of the Presidential Elections by Provinces (2018)



**Source:** (Yeni Şafak, 2020c)

The results of the Parliamentary Elections held in 2018 also coincided with both the results of the Presidential Elections in 2018 and local elections in 2019, except for Adana and Hatay (Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** Vote Rate Distribution of the Parliamentary Elections by Provinces (2018)



Source: (Yeni Şafak, 2020d)

## 7. POLITICAL STANCE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES ABOUT SYRIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS

The election manifestos of the political parties won the mayoral elections in 2019 and the majority of the local assembly or council by being in the first three was also analyzed on the axis of Syrian asylum seekers in this study, as mentioned before. The findings indicate that the AK Party and MHP which have won eight of 12 municipalities and SP which has a 14% vote potential in Şanlıurfa have never mentioned migration and/or Syrian asylum seekers in their election manifestos<sup>10</sup>. On the contrary, CHP-Nation’s Alliance and HDP which mentioned various pledges and policy proposals about Syrian asylum seekers in their election manifestos have won only four mayorships (AK Party, 2019; CHP, 2019; İYİ Party, 2019a; HDP, 2019; SP, 2019).

In the election manifesto of CHP, pledges, and policies about migration are included under the title of “Local Governments Sensitive to Migration Problems” declaring that the migration issues will be held by developing effective local migration policies. In this context, according to the election manifesto of CHP, immigrant offices will be formed in municipalities; research and projects will be made about immigrants and related issues collaborating with universities and NGOs; studies will be conducted in the fields of immigrants’ education, occupational training, social and cultural adaptation, professional and psychological support; and immigrants who want to return to their home countries will be supported (CHP, 2019, p. 27).

<sup>10</sup> MHP and BBP did not publish electoral statements for the Local Elections in 2019.



HDP consolidated its pledges and policies about migration under the title of “We will offer refugees an honorable life” in its election manifesto. In this regard, HDP declared that the basic needs of refugees will be supplied, discrimination will be stopped, free healthcare services will be offered at the healthcare centers of municipalities, the opportunity to benefit from the services of municipalities in their mother tongue will be offered, refugee camps will be inspected regularly and education in mother tongue will be supported for refugee children (HDP, 2019, p. 32).

It can be claimed that from the beginning of the influx, AK Party rulership and more specifically President Erdoğan had a different approach to this influx compared to other political parties and the Syrian influx is interpreted as a historical opportunity rather than a problem. AK Party rulership appeals to the political sensitivities of its political base by approaching the Syrians in the context of “religious brothership”<sup>11</sup> by referencing Islamic history. On the other hand, AK Party rulership has kept on its agenda as an alternative policy option the way of using Syrian asylum seekers as leverage against Europe. Because AK Party is dissatisfied with not being able to receive the necessary financial support for the needs of Syrians as promised.

The other partner of the Public’s Alliance, the MHP, has deemed it appropriate to follow a policy that chooses not to stand out too much in this regard, by adhering to the contract of acting together in the alliance and not objecting to the general approach of the AK Party. On the other hand, when the ideology that MHP is representing and the historical perspective of the parties against the Arabs since the First World War are considered, it is hard to conclude that the political base of the party is also approving the policies conducted by the MHP executives. In this regard, the support given by the political base of the MHP to asylum policies should be understood within the hierarchy and discipline in the party’s political culture which is shown by the motto “the leader, the organization and the doctrine is not arguable”.

Syrian asylum seekers are considered as a serious national security issue both for the public and the state in the middle and long term by the partners of the Nation’s Alliance. According to the IYI Party, the population growth ratio of the asylum seekers is the main concern, also the problems with the adaptation of the Syrians to the culture of living together were frequently expressed. The Mayor of the Metropolitan Municipality of Hatay, Lütfü Savaş, who is known for his nationalist history but was elected from the list of CHP, has also remarked on the population growth of the asylum seekers and pointed out that this kind of growth of population will be the cause of the change in political power within Hatay and its districts in the near future (Sputnik, 2019). In this context, this kind of a sensational

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<sup>11</sup> The Prophet of Islam, Hz. Muhammad and the Muslims of Mecca were forced to migrate from Mecca to Medina in 622 because of the oppression they suffered. The Muslims who showed hospitality and hosted them in Medina were then called “ansar” which means “the ones who help”. The Muslims of Mecca then took the name “muhajir” which means “immigrant”.

statement may have had an influence on the re-election of Mr. Savaş as mayor in 2019 by making the public on alert.

The main statement of the IYI Party about asylum seekers before and after the elections has been that asylum seekers should be sent to their home countries immediately. In this regard, a workshop titled “The Workshop on the Return of the Syrian Asylum Seekers to Their Home Country” was organized by the end of 2019, and the statement “We believe that everybody will be happy in his/her home country” was highlighted by the president of the party (IYI Party, 2019b).

On the other hand, the senior partner of the Nation’s Alliance, the CHP has maintained a more humanitarian approach by highlighting the necessity for the improvement of the policies for supplying the basic needs of asylum seekers such as education, healthcare, and accommodation in the short term. Additionally, another focused policy field of the CHP has been the adaptation of asylum seekers as long as they live in Turkey. According to CHP, the return of the asylum seekers to their home country should be discussed in detail in long term and be conducted gradually.

According to the political program and promises, it can be understood that the political elites of HDP are not fundamentally against Syrian asylum seekers. Although based on different reasons, it can be claimed that HDP is politically close to AK Party in this subject and both political parties are trying to find a way to establish the rules of living together with Syrians.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

It should be mentioned that the existence of the Syrians, who are forced to migrate because of the civil war in their home country, has become one of the main fields of political interest in Turkish politics at local and national levels.

Based on our findings; we argue that despite the discomfort experienced by the society, the presence of Syrian asylum seekers in the provinces which were analyzed in this study doesn’t affect the political choices of the electors living in the same provinces for local governments. On the contrary, it can be claimed that the existence of Syrian asylum seekers may be an opportunity for the capitalist class (especially for the medium and large-scale enterprises) in these provinces based on many reasons such as the advantages of unregistered and cheap employment. Concerning the data on inflation and unemployment mentioned above, we argue that the political choices of the voters are formed more by their ideological commitment based on the political culture in which they live than macro-level economic parameters. When the results of both the presidential and local elections are taken into account, we observe that the inflation and unemployment data in the provinces where the Public’s Alliance holds office do not generally lead to a refugee-based reactivity.

In this regard, we can conclude that despite the economic facts which are affecting the daily life of the society, the political choices of the voters are formed around their ideological commitments. It can be claimed that the presence of Syrian asylum seekers, which has reached a significant number since

2014, does not constitute a political ground that will enable the dissolution of the ideological commitments of voters in Turkey. On the contrary, the fact that the issue was explained by the current political authority on the basis of the Ansar-muhajir relationship and that a large number of asylum seekers was used as political leverage against the West from time to time fed the ideological weaknesses of the majority of the voters who voted for both the AK Party and the MHP.

The results of the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections held in Turkey in 2023 also support the conclusions of this study. In addition to the difficult economic conditions in Turkey, especially since 2020, it is seen that the far-right discourses based on anti-refugee sentiments that started to rise in the last two years are not reflected in the election results. The Public's Alliance, which expanded with right-conservative and ideologically Islamist parties such as the Grand Union Party (BBP), HUDA-PAR, and New Prosperity Party (YRP) formed the parliamentary majority and Erdoğan won the Presidency again.

The study does not necessitate Ethics Committee permission.

The study has been crafted in adherence to the principles of research and publication ethics.

The authors declare that there exists no financial conflict of interest involving any institution, organization, or individual(s) associated with the article. Furthermore, there are no conflicts of interest among the authors themselves.

The authors contributed equally to the entire process of the research.

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