

Özgün Makale

Investigating the Religion-Based Solidarity Shown by the Turkish Community to the Syrian Forced Immigrants During the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

Türkiye'de Yaşayan Suriyeli Zorunlu Göçmenlere COVID-19 Pandemi Döneminde Türk Toplumunun Gösterdiği Din Temelli Dayanışmanın İncelenmesi

Ziad ALAHMAD*

Abstract

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the quality of life for all humans all over the world, it was reported that the pandemic succeeded in bringing people closer to each other by activating mechanical solidarity and a sense of acknowledgment. On the other hand, the forced immigrants were more affected during the pandemic compared to other groups, but there is no evidence that the pandemic made the hosts get closer to the forced immigrants. Looking from the religion-based solidarity point of view, this paper tries to investigate if the Turkish community became closer to the Syrians during the pandemic. Using an original data set, the result of the Mann-Whitney U test shows that there is moderate evidence of the role of religion in bringing the hosts closer to the forced immigrants in Turkey, anticipating that there is a small role of religion-based solidarity in Turkey during and after the pandemic.

Keywords: Syrians, Turkey, Solidarity, Religion, COVID-19.

Öz

COVID-19 pandemisi dünyanın her köşesinde insanların yaşam kalitesini etkilemiş olsa da pandeminin dayanışma ve kabullenme duygusunu harekete geçirerek insanları birbirine yakınlaştırmayı başardığı belirtilmektedir. Bununla birlikte zorunlu göçmenlerin pandemi sırasında diğer gruplara göre daha fazla etkilendiği dile getirilse de pandeminin, ev sahiplerini zorunlu göçmenlere yakınlaştırdığına dair bir kanıt bulunmamaktadır. Bu makale din temelli dayanışma açısından pandemi döneminde Türk toplumunun Suriyelilere yaklaşımını incelemeye

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* Ph.D. Candidate, Graduate School of Global Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, ziad88ahmad@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-4030-4370.

çalışmaktadır. Orijinal bir veri seti kullanarak hazırlanan Mann-Whitney *U* testinin sonucu, din temelli dayanışmanın küçük bir rolü olduğunu tahmin ederek, Türkiye'deki ev sahiplerini zorunlu göçmenlere yaklaştırmada dinin rolüne dair orta düzeyde kanıt olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriyeliler, Türkiye, Dayanışma, Din, COVID-19.

Introduction

Every corner of the world was influenced by COVID-19 without a single discrimination; loss of human life and income was similar in every country and people went through severe emotional distress. On the contrary, looking to the positive side, this calamity brought people closer to each other more than before on the national and the international levels because their risk and aimed target is similar, which is shielding everyone around the world from the virus starting from their community. Accordingly, it is safe to say that the pandemic increased the solidarity between people and enforced the sense of acknowledgement for each other (Voicu, et al., 2020, pp. 900-901).

Durkheim (1984) in his book *The Division of Labour in Society* stated that under normal circumstances, improvement in organic solidarity can be seen among modern societies (pp. 291-310). Nevertheless, amidst a calamity, organic solidarity is highly influenced, and it is substituted by other forms of the traditional mechanical solidarity (Mishra & Rath, 2020, pp. 3). Solidarity becomes more vital and important in times of calamity (Vancsó & Zoltán, 2021, p. 102), and it is more remarkable in the religious communities as solidarity is the building block of any religion. Mechanical solidarity is reinforced through quoting religion which becomes an immense necessity in such critical times. Moreover, several studies have proven that amid the crisis the presence of religion became stronger in the public sphere (Butler, Habermas, Taylor, & West, 2011; Hjelm, 2014; Vancsó & Zoltán, 2021).

Even though all communities got affected during the COVID pandemic, some communities got severely affected compared to others as they have less resources and capacities. The most disadvantaged group were specifically the forced immigrants who underwent very stressful conditions and were more exposed to risk during the crisis owing to scarcity of resources at hand paired with financial burden and limited capacity to cope with emotional breakdown of the crisis. Moreover, increasing rate of hate speech and racism against them globally has peaked their troubles in such times (Freier & Vera Espinoza, 2021, p. 8). Nevertheless, if we see from a mechanical solidarity point of view, the role of religion-based solidarity is not clear in terms of forced immigrant-host relations amid the outbreak of the pandemic as the protection measures require social distancing to be followed, while religion, as one of the forms of mechanical solidarity, promotes reducing the social distance in such a situation. In other words, it is not clear if the forced immigrants were helped to get over from the adverse influence of the pandemic through solidarity from the hosts.

This study will assess the case of the Syrian forced immigrants in Turkey as approximately four million Syrians are present in Turkey since over a decade. On the other hand, despite both communities being Muslim, there is a rising sound of increasing tension amongst them. In addition, it was claimed that before the pandemic there was an extreme social distance practiced between the communities which mainly came from the host side compared to the forced immigrants (Erdoğan, 2020, pp. 149-150). Keeping this in mind, we will conduct a non-parametric test on an original dataset to analyse how religion functions in terms of mechanical solidarity during the

crisis, and try to figure out the answer to this question: Is there any role of religion in decreasing the social gap between Syrian forced immigrants and Turkish host community during the pandemic and bringing the hosts closer to the forced immigrants? Assuming that more solidarity will be represented by the hosts who are strictly religious towards the other community and develop a sense of closeness during the crisis.

Three primary sections are made to categorise this paper: first, recognising the definition of solidarity as per the literature and what Islam says about the concept of solidarity. Second, a precise background regarding the circumstances of the Syrians in Turkey specially during the crises. And lastly, explanation of the methodology and discussion of the empirical findings of the paper.

Solidarity between Theory and Islamic Practices

Social sciences and humanities have a huge history behind the concept of solidarity. Nonetheless, literature has no unified definition of or approach regarding this concept. In fact, there is a coexistence of multiple kinds of solidarity with various philosophical underpinnings (Bauder & Juffs, 2019, p. 1). Emil Durkheim's definition of solidarity is considered to be the oldest and most cited one and used as a theoretical framework in this area. He said that the unity amongst individuals in a society is the social solidarity which enables social order and stability; it emphasizes the interdependence of the people in a society and develops a sense of making the lives of others better (Durkheim, 1984, pp. 25-28). Durkheim's work was considered the core of sociology's classic; he charted the evolution of the contemporary relationship between people and society, which is still valid even after more than a century (Tiryakian, 1994, p. 3). Durkheim developed the dichotomy between mechanical and organic solidarity to discover the changes in social bonds that bridges the gap between the people within a society, besides it shows how people perceive their place in the society as a whole (Ritzer, 2010, p. 85). As per the explanation of Durkheim, in traditional societies where people are alike, mechanical solidarity can be seen while in modern societies where there are different individuals having differences and have distinct goals, organic solidarity is observed (Durkheim, 1984, pp. xvi-xvii). In traditional societies, mechanical solidarity is driven by collective conscience whereas in modern societies, organic solidarity is the offshoot of division of labour and interdependence give birth to organic solidarity (Evans & Evans, 1977, p. 30; Durkheim, 1984, pp.68-88).

In other words, mechanical solidarity can be defined as all individuals in a certain community having the same status regardless of their role, and this equal status stems from common values, beliefs, and a similar worldview. These similarities make them form solid relationships, depend on each other, and collaborate to sustain the advancement of society. For example, in small homogenous communities and groups, community members can take several roles and responsibilities, besides the fixed one, which is their membership in the group. On the contrary, organic solidarity is represented by creating a separate role for each individual in the community. For instance, contemporary communities require a teacher, a doctor, a technician, and so on. Each one of them has a specific role in the community, and what brings them together is their dependency on each other rather than their beliefs and values.

Following Durkheim's guiding rules, further discussion took place in the last decades regarding the concept of solidarity and its division. Solidarity is explained as a condition where others are positively related to the well-being of an individual as per contemporary literature (De Beer & Koster, 2009, p. 12); it might not be clear in daily life practices but in critical situations,

it becomes greatly significant (Grajczjár, Nagy, & Örkény, 2019, p. 136). The contemporary literature discussed the sources of solidarity and four 'main sources' of solidarity were figured out by Oosterlynck et al. (2016): struggle, encounter, interdependence and similar norms and values (p. 766). Besides, Agustín and Jørgensenthe (2018) suggested that there is a need to differentiate between institutional solidarity, autonomous solidarity, and civic solidarity (p. 15). While other scholars stated that the solidarity should be grouped as: transitive solidarity, relational solidarity, and creative solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 51).

In non-western communities, solidarity is an auspicious concept where it refers to staying loyal to country, politics, family, ethnicity, and religious fundamentals, and this can be defined as 'empowering your "own" people' (Kapeller & Wolkenstein, 2013, p. 486). Social solidarity is not confined to just collective responsibility for promoting the betterment of the individuals who are at large a part of a group or a community (Paskov & Dewilde, 2012, p. 427) but it encourages to take care of the less influential members of the group in terms of their needs and rights as well (Reichlin, 2011, p. 366; Stjernø, 2004, p.16).

It is worth noting that much scholarly attention is given to this concept since the last decade, specifically in account of refugees and migrants arriving, for instance (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018; Rygiel, 2011) taking the enforceable trust and bounded solidarity into consideration (Portes, 1998, pp. 7-8; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993, p.1332). Suggesting that the first form of solidarity is practiced when it becomes impossible to the newcomers to go back home because of the confrontation while the other form takes place when newcomers are welcomed and supported by those migrants who have developed strong roots in the host community (Yusupova & Ponarin, 2018, p.189).

It is important to consider the fact that after 9/11 and the economic crisis in 2008, solidarity became the major topic of research which indicated that solidarity becomes strong under the circumstances of any existential threat (Collins, 2004, p.67). This became even more important after 2015 when Europe claimed about the so-called refugee crisis (e.g. Della Porta, 2018; Wallaschek, 2019; Bernát, Kertész, & Tóth, 2016). However, the questions related to solidarity and activities in civil society gained the spotlight again after the wave of COVID-19 (e.g. Carlsen, Toubøl, & Brincker, 2020; Brechenmacher, Carothers, & Youngs, 2022).

If we talk about solidarity under the light of religion, we see that the concept of solidarity was present even before contemporary literature was developed because every religion reinforces solidarity as a fundamental. For instance, Judaism preaches solidarity as a core subject where believers are encouraged to love their neighbours and help them (Yanklowitz, 2018, p.1). Likewise, Catholic faith forms its basis on the seven social teachings which talk about solidarity, where humans are encouraged to consider others as brothers and sisters and readily work for their betterment without discriminating between "race, economy, economy, ethnicity, nation and ideological differences" (Bradley-Levine & Carr, 2015, p. 31).

For Muslims, solidarity is the foremost rule to be practiced. Social solidarity in Islam mainly means every Muslim should clearly know about his duties to be supportive towards fellow Muslims who are needy (Hameed, 2016, p. 119). According to An-Nu'mān ibn Bashīr, Prophet Muhammad said: "The believers, in their mutual love, compassion, and sympathy are like a single body; if one of its organs suffers, the whole body will respond to it with sleeplessness and fever."(translated from Arabic) (Muslim, n.d.).

In Islamic history we can find a lot of stories related to solidarity. The most significant one was the Muslim immigrants from Mecca to Medina. While the immigrants were called "Muhaji-

run" which means migrants in Arabic, the hosts called themselves "Ansar" which means "supporters". The relationship they shared between them did not rely on laws of protection but on social solidarity and a unique "brotherhood". The properties and money of the Ansar was happily shared by them with Muhajirun on equal basis and they were treated just like the locals. Islam says that in times of crisis and exceptional circumstances, solidarity is the best way to help each other effectively (Alwan, n.d., p. 7). Besides, solidarity in Islam is grouped into different sections: economic solidarity, psychological solidarity, and scientific solidarity (Hameed, 2016, pp. 120-121).

In conclusion, there are numerous interpretations and forms of "solidarity" in the literature; nonetheless, Durkheim's dichotomy was selected as the foundation of this article since it allows concentrating on the essence of solidarity. The social solidarity that is defined in religions as a whole, and in Islam in particular, as the sense of acknowledging the needs of other group members, supporting them, and being there for the most impacted and helping them to get back on their feet, is precisely what Durkheim's mechanical solidarity explains.

Syrians in Turkey – From Disaster to Disaster

Over 13 million Syrians have been forced to leave their homes due to the continued violence in their homeland since 2011 (UNHCR, 2022). Either they fled to other countries in search of protection or were displaced within their country. As Turkey is in the neighbourhood of Syria, the biggest share of the Syrians found their way to there, and now it hosts the largest proportion of Syrians, which as per current statistics is over 3.6 million (DGMM, 2022).

Although there is no clear statistic regarding the sect of the Syrians in Turkey, few studies calculated that nine in ten Syrians claim to be Muslim Sunni and likewise as per the calculations Muslim Sunni have a big share in Turkish population (Jancewicz, 2021, p. 25). Turkey applied the open-door policy for Syrians escaping the war, and following the footsteps of Muslims in early times, Turkey stood with the Syrians from the first day under Islamic solidarity and "brotherhood", referring Syrians as "Muhajirun" and "Ansar" to the host community (Habery, 2022). It should be noted that there was no legal status of the Syrians in Turkey for more than three years, they were entitled to being considered as brothers and guests until 2014 when the Turkish authorities activated the temporary protection system which provided them the official rights to live in Turkey until their safe return to home.

Nevertheless, the sense of solidarity as brotherhood started to demean after few years. It was foretold by Erdoğan (2014), stating that this hospitality will diminish as the opportunities for work and social welfare are decreasing while the duration of Syrians stay is increasing (p. 72). Even practically, the tension among both the communities rose and there was a widespread of hate speech which gave way to various anti-Syrian campaigns in the last years (Liszowska, 2020, p. 71).

However, anti-Syrians sentiments is not the only challenge in Syrians' daily life in Turkey, they also suffer to access employment opportunities and a proper shelter (Erdoğan, 2020, pp. 141-145). During the pandemic, the sufferings of Syrians became even more terrible as a huge number of workers lost their jobs due to lockdown and other COVID-19 prevention measures (Karaman & Vesek, 2021, pp. 46-60; ASAM, 2020; MUDEM, 2020; HASUDER, 2020).

To serve the cause of brotherhood and social solidarity many local initiatives were taken in Turkey to help the most underprivileged members of the community which included forced immigrants as well (DİTİB, 2021; Anadolu agency, 2020). But still, the anti-Syrian sentiments were in its place even during the pandemic. In fact, it was promoted on some social media channels that

the virus was spread by Syrians, for instance, a Twitter trend in Turkey on 27.05.2020. Along with this, Turkish police killed an 18-year-old Syrian Ali El Hamdan for not wearing a mask which was the saddest event that took place (Pekal, 2021). And lastly, the attack of Altındağ neighbourhood in the capital Ankara can also not be forgotten (Cumhuriyet, 2021).

Methodology

Research Pattern

This paper aimed to find out that whether the religion-based solidarity strengthened during the pandemic crises which could have helped in reducing the social distance between the two communities, from the Turkish side in particular, hypothesizing that more solidarity and closeness will be practiced during COVID-19 by those who are more religious.

It is important to note that the forced immigrants' side could also be used to carry out the test but here the host community was central, as the result from the host community is more important in this regard. The hosts are privileged in terms of power and influence on this relationship. They are in position to show more support and solidarity with the forced immigrants during the COVID-19 whereas the forced immigrants are less privileged and cannot be a strong support for the hosts.

Methods and Procedures of Data Collection

This paper uses an original probability dataset collected between January and February 2022 in the form of a poll survey in Gaziantep (Alahmad & Aoyama, 2022). The data was gathered in 20 neighbourhoods in Gaziantep metropolitan to represent the different socio-economic statuses of the residents of the city. Besides, it covers the areas where Syrians are concentrated in both Şehitkamil and Şahinbey. In addition, the research team selected five streets in each neighbourhood using the Kish table technique, and five participants were chosen through a random walk.

Universe and Sample

The sample gives a good representation of the Turkish community in Gaziantep, and it covers different categories of the community. For instance: gender, age, marital status, and educational level, as clarified in Table 1.

Gender	Male	Female	
	239 (53%)	212 (47%)	
Age	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
	18 years old	75 years old	38.7 years old
Marital status	Married	Single	Other
	287 (63.6%)	141 (31.3%)	23 (5.1%)
Educational level	Elementary education and below	Secondary and high school	University degree and above
	145 (32.1%)	177 (39.2%)	129 (28.7%)

Note: N= 451

Table 1 :Descriptive Statistics of the Respondent's Profile.

The dataset covers different elements associated with the circumstances and self-perceptions of both communities in general and specifically during COVID-19, which helps in analysing the research question of this paper.

Statistical Test and Variables Selection

Even though different statistical analyses can be used for this purpose, *Mean* and *Median* comparison were preferred as they help show the difference between the two groups. The histogram of the test variable shows an approximate normal distribution. Still, the grouping variable divides the sample into two unequal samples, which makes the data set appropriate for performing the Mann-Whitney *U* test. This test will assess the difference religion has made in terms of increased closeness and solidarity by Turks towards the Syrian community during the pandemic.

“By living the same risk and having the same fears, how did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the relationship between Turkish and Syrian communities?” (Q03-17) was the question selected as a test variable from Turkish community’s data set. The answers were recorded in an ordinal form as follow: (1= It made us feel like we are completely separate communities 2= It made us feel a bit farther from each other 3= No impact 4= It made us feel a bit closer to each other 5= It made us feel like we are one community), and the option “I do not know” was regarded as a missing value and was eliminated listwise prior the test.

Another question employed as a grouping variable was: “To what extent sharing the same religion with the Syrian community is important for you to live in harmony with them?” (Q08-03). The answers were recorded to a binary dummy variable after listwise eliminating the option “I do not now”, (0= Religion is not important to live together, 1= Religion is important to live together). Table 2 gives further details about the descriptive statistics of the variables.

Methods and Procedures of Data Analysis

SPSS 28 was used to conduct the test. Any influential outliers were filtered out from the dataset before the assessment, and to ensure equal variance between the two samples, the test of homogeneity of variance was carried out on the assumption that the value of the Levene statistics relied on the Median is 2.808 on the significance level $P = .094$.

Besides, as SPSS does not calculate the effect size for this test automatically, the *r* value was estimated using the formula, $r = Z/\sqrt{N}$ (Rosenthal, 1994, pp. 231-244) and assessed based on Cohen’s (1988, pp. 25-26) benchmarks ($r = 0.2$) small, ($r = 0.5$) medium, and ($r = 0.8$) large for assessing the effect size.

Measures	COVID Impact on the relationship with the other community (1= very far, 5= very close)	Religion importance to live in harmony with the other community (0= not important, 1= important)
Mean	2.713	0.634
Median	3	1
SD	0.768	0.482
Range	4	1
Minimum	1	0
Maximum	5	1
Sum	1224	286

Note: $N = 451$

Table 2 :Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables.

Finally, it is important to note that Ganesh and Caves' (2018, p. 55) guidelines were used in this paper to investigate the P value as follow: $p < 0.001$ means very strong evidence, $p < 0.01$ strong evidence, $p < 0.05$ moderate evidence, $p < 0.1$ weak evidence or a trend, and $p \geq 0.1$ means inadequate evidence.

Results

To evaluate the difference in closeness with the forced immigrants during the pandemic between the ones who think that religion is important to live in harmony and the ones who think it is not important from the members of the host community, Mann-Whitney *U* Test was utilized. On the significance level of $P = 0.022$ the test revealed significant differences in the closeness during the pandemic of the ones who care less about religion (Median = 3, $n = 165$, Median rank = 210.47) and the ones who care about religion (Median = 3, $n = 286$, Median rank = 234.96), $U = 21032.5$, $z = -2.289$, $r = .107$. Hence, the data shows a small effect size, and provide moderate evidence to support the hypothesis that the host community members who care about religion show more solidarity and closeness during the pandemic with the forced immigrants.

Discussion and Conclusion

The literature shows that during a calamity, people get closer to each other, influenced by the effect of mechanical solidarity. However, there is no evidence that this can include the way the host communities look at the forced immigrants. This paper focuses on religion-based solidarity as one of the traditional forms of mechanical solidarity. It tries to investigate if the Turkish host community became more open to the Syrians living with them in Gaziantep during the pandemic, as both communities are Muslims and share the same values and beliefs.

The preformed statistical analysis in this paper provides moderate evidence on the positive role of religion in reducing the gap between the host communities and the forced immigrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, a small effect size is represented by the results, although religion has a limited role in the Turkish context during the pandemic. Still, it might be one of the important factors that increase the solidarity amongst the forced immigrants and the host communities, but it is not the strongest, and if any solidarity was shown during the pandemic, it could be based on other humanitarian or organic basis.

The possible explanation for the weak effect size is that the time of religious solidarity is fading away after a decade of brotherhood, as there are other circumstances in Turkey nowadays and the general viewpoint towards Syrians has changed regardless of religious attachment. Besides, it can be said that the rise of the new nationalism ideology in Turkey, which uses various media channels to promote incomplete and misleading news, is one of the main likely reasons for increasing the distance between hosts and Syrians, as it might loosen the feeling of brotherhood and make the locals, even the religious ones, see the Syrians as a threat to the Turkish nation (Bozdağ, 2020, p. 724; Fahim, 2022). Yet, these reasons are potential ones, and there is a need for further investigations to unveil any other factors that influence the religion-based solidarity of the host community over time.

Going beyond the current results and investigate the part played by the religion in forced immigrants-hosts relationship based on the claim that religious solidarity is stronger during calamity, we can deduce that if the influence of religious solidarity is not strong during COVID crisis, then in normal times, it would have an even smaller impact. Hence, there should be other

ways adopted by the Syrian forced immigrants to get close to the hosts when "brotherhood" fades away as the host community is becoming diverse and vibrant.

Finally, it should be noted that this paper has three main limitations: first, the sample size in this study cannot be generalized as it is not very big, and it is from a certain region. Second, the analysis focuses on one self-perception question only while to evaluate the solidarity there is a need to assess it on the practical level as well, and other questions should be asked such as "did you provide any support to Syrians during the pandemic?", or "how many times did you provide support to Syrians during the pandemic?", And lastly, it is assumed here that the power of religious solidarity is fading away but this cannot be confirmed as there is no baseline to compare the results before and after the pandemic. But still, it can be said that it is less than what the Turkish community showed in the first couple of years. Accordingly, this study can be regarded as a pilot paper or an eye opener for further research regarding the role of religion-based solidarity in bridging the gap between the forced immigrants and the hosts in times which are testing and in normal times as well.

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