



CENTRO DE INVESTIGACIONES
DE TRABAJO SOCIAL

ISSN 2244-808X
DL pp 201002Z43506

PERSPECTIVA INTERACCION Y

Revista de Trabajo Social

Vol. 16 No. 2
Mayo - Agosto
2026

Universidad del Zulia

Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Políticas
Centro de Investigaciones en Trabajo Social

INTERACCIÓN Y PERSPECTIVA

Revista de Trabajo Social

ISSN 2244-808X ~ Dep. Legal pp 201002Z43506

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19245766>

Vol. 16 (2): 620 - 636 pp, 2026

ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Refugiados a la sombra de los terremotos en Turquía: aumento de las vulnerabilidades de integración y sus causas después de 2023

Gülseren Ergün¹, Çiğdem Akman², Melike Akpınar³

¹PhD. Candidate, Süleyman Demirel University Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Isparta/Turkey.

Email: gulserenergun81@gmail.com; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0860-8961>

²Professor, Süleyman Demirel University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Isparta/Turkey.

Email: cigdemakman@sdu.edu.tr; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1936-6884>

³Lecturer, Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Vocational School of Social Sciences, Department of Wholesale and Retail Sales, Karaman/Turkey.

Email: melikeakpinar@kmu.edu.tr; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0453-6008>

Resumen. Ser refugiado deja a las personas vulnerables a desafíos multidimensionales como la incertidumbre legal, las dificultades económicas, las barreras lingüísticas y la exclusión social. Grandes desastres como los terremotos exacerban estas vulnerabilidades. Los terremotos del 6 de febrero que afectaron a las provincias de Adana, Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Elâzığ, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, Kilis, Malatya, Osmaniye y Şanlıurfa en la región de Anatolia Suroriental de Turquía han empeorado las condiciones de vida de los refugiados y han creado deficiencias en áreas básicas. Las dificultades económicas, los problemas de infraestructura y la retórica de los políticos en general han aumentado las tensiones entre los refugiados y la población local, creando nuevos obstáculos para el proceso de integración social. Esta situación ha afectado negativamente las condiciones materiales, las relaciones sociales y el sentido de pertenencia de los refugiados, haciendo que sus procesos de integración sean más frágiles. En este sentido, el objetivo de este estudio es analizar cómo se han profundizado las vulnerabilidades multidimensionales que enfrentan los refugiados en el proceso de integración social en Turquía tras el terremoto. El método de esta investigación es descriptivo, en el cual los investigadores examinaron el tema utilizando estudios de campo y haciendo referencia a documentos existentes. Los resultados muestran que este estudio muestra que el terremoto ha incrementado las vulnerabilidades existentes de los refugiados y que la inseguridad habitacional, los problemas de acceso a los servicios, las pérdidas económicas y el discurso discriminatorio en particular han debilitado el proceso de integración social.

Palabras clave: terremoto, refugiado, integración social, vulnerabilidad, desastres.

Refugees in the shadow of earthquakes in Turkey: increasing integration vulnerabilities and their causes after 2023

Abstract. Being a refugee leaves individuals vulnerable to multidimensional challenges such as legal uncertainty, economic hardship, language barriers, and social exclusion. Major disasters such as earthquakes exacerbate these vulnerabilities. The February 6 earthquakes affecting the provinces of Adana, Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Elâzığ, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, Kilis, Malatya, Osmaniye, and Şanlıurfa in Turkey's Southeast Anatolia Region have worsened the living conditions of refugees and created deficiencies in basic areas. Economic hardship, infrastructure problems, and the rhetoric of politicians in general have increased tensions between refugees and the local population, creating new obstacles to the social integration process. This situation has negatively affected refugees' material conditions, social relationships, and sense of belonging, making their integration processes more fragile. In this sense, the aim of this study is to analyze how the multidimensional vulnerabilities faced by refugees in the social integration process in Turkey have deepened after the earthquake. The method of this research is descriptive, in which the researchers examined the subject using field studies and referring to existing documents. Results show that this study shows that the earthquake has increased the existing vulnerabilities of refugees and that housing insecurity, problems accessing services, economic losses, and discriminatory discourse in particular have weakened the social integration process.

Keywords: earthquake, refugee, social integration, vulnerability, disasters.

INTRODUCTION

Disasters are extraordinary events that cause widespread physical, social and economic destruction, often exceeding the coping capacity of affected communities (Angin, 2024). Earthquakes stand out among disasters due to their sudden occurrence and destructive effects. Unlike slow-onset disasters, earthquakes occur without warning, leaving affected communities with little to no opportunity to prepare or evacuate in advance. This not only results in loss of life and property but also disrupts institutional structures and social relationships. Earthquakes disproportionately affect already disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities, the elderly, vulnerable children, women, refugees, and migrants, making them not only a physical but also an ethical and political issue. Therefore, earthquake response and recovery processes are closely related not only to physical reconstruction but also to the repair of social bonds.

Vulnerability refers to the weak position of individuals and communities in economic, social, cultural and legal systems, and their lack of protection against risks (Çuhadar, 2019: 32). Refugees face multidimensional vulnerabilities such as legal status uncertainties, economic difficulties, language barriers, social exclusion, problems accessing health services, and psychosocial trauma. These vulnerabilities create both individual and societal barriers in social integration processes, posing serious obstacles to integration.

Refugees are a vulnerable group forced to flee their countries due to conflict, persecution or natural disasters. This status is shaped not only by legal definitions but also by experiences such as forced displacement, uncertainty and loss of identity. As the country hosting the largest number of refugees in the world, Turkey is one of the places where this vulnerability is most intensely felt. Refugees are often vulnerable to natural disasters because they live in informal, poorly equipped or overcrowded areas. Additionally, the restrictions they face in accessing social services and the uncertainty surrounding their legal status make it even more difficult for them to access support mechanisms during disasters.

The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted refugees' access to healthcare services and deepened economic and social exclusion. The addition of a devastating disaster such as an earthquake to these vulnerabilities has further reduced refugees' resilience and negatively affected social integration processes. It has not only destroyed buildings but also eliminated access to basic services such as healthcare, education and shelter, thereby exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. The problems experienced in accessing shelter, healthcare, economic livelihoods and social services following the 6 February earthquakes have increased the risk of social exclusion for refugees, creating new challenges in the social integration process. The earthquake has once again highlighted the importance of social solidarity and inclusive services, demonstrating the urgency of addressing existing issues in the social integration of refugees.

Although it is thought that earthquakes will increase solidarity among communities in theory, in practice this situation often makes existing inequalities and social fault lines more visible. When it comes to refugees, social integration efforts are weakened by reasons such as lack of legal status, cultural differences, economic competition and social exclusion. In Turkey, despite the state's rhetoric of inclusivity, post-earthquake practices have seen inequalities in access to services and debates over the distinction between citizens and refugees. This perceived injustice in the distribution of aid, shelter, and health services has created resentment and hostility towards refugees among the local population.

One of the most obvious outcomes of this situation is a sense of 'resentment' or, more harshly, 'anger' at the social level. This anger is fuelled by perceptions that one group is being favoured, neglected or victimised over another. Following the earthquakes on 6 February, various social groups, and particularly certain political actors and media outlets, have argued that the aid provided to refugees is 'excessive' or that the local population has been neglected. However, research shows that the local population and refugees live in harmony to a large extent. Such exclusionary approaches arising in the humanitarian crisis created by the earthquakes can undermine not only social harmony but also human values.

The primary objective of this study is to comprehensively examine the multidimensional vulnerabilities faced by refugees in Turkey during the social integration process and the increase in these vulnerabilities following the 6 February earthquake. To this end, the theoretical and conceptual framework of social integration, vulnerability and earthquake concepts is first presented. Subsequently, the effects of the 6 February earthquakes on the social integration vulnerabilities of refugees are examined in detail, focusing on issues in key areas such as housing, employment, health, and education, as well as dimensions of social exclusion and discrimination. Finally, the

state's social integration strategies for refugees in the post-earthquake period are evaluated in light of the challenges encountered in implementation and policy recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a comprehensive literature review. The research focuses on the factors that deepen the integration vulnerabilities of refugees in Turkey and the related migration dynamics. During the data collection process, existing academic publications, official institutional reports, policy documents, and findings from previous field studies related to the subject were carefully examined. Therefore the method of this research is descriptive, in which the researchers examined the subject using field studies and referring to existing documents. This methodological approach enabled the synthesis and analysis of information obtained from different disciplines and various types of sources related to the subject under consideration from a holistic perspective. Thus, the complex and multidimensional structure of social integration processes and migration policies in Turkey has been examined in depth. Based on the findings obtained through this method, the study aims to make a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field of migration and social integration in Turkey.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The impact of the 6 february earthquakes on the vulnerability of refugees

Turkey is located on the Anatolian Plate, which has historically been the site of major earthquakes, with the oldest recorded earthquake occurring in 411 BC. Since 1900, 20 major earthquakes with a magnitude of 7 or higher have been recorded. As a result, Turkey ranks among the countries most affected by earthquakes. Between 1900 and 2023, a total of 269 earthquakes causing loss of life and significant damage were recorded in Turkey. The largest of these earthquakes were the 6 February Kahramanmaraş, 1939 Erzincan, and 1999 Gölcük-centred Marmara earthquakes (SBB, 2023: 17).

The major earthquakes that occurred on 6 February caused significant loss of life and property, destroyed infrastructure, and had a negative impact on the local and national economy. They not only caused physical destruction but also had long-term social effects. Especially in the early days, weaknesses in aid and logistics networks caused life-saving assistance to arrive late, which led to a strong reaction from the local population. However, the 1.7 million foreign nationals in the region were also affected by the earthquake, further deepening social cohesion vulnerabilities. Structural inequalities in areas such as housing, health, education, access to services and social exclusion have become more visible in the aftermath of the earthquake. The proximity of the earthquake zone to the Syrian border has been an important factor in the increase in the refugee population settling in this region, especially after the Syrian civil war. The fact that they speak the same language and share similar cultural characteristics has facilitated their integration with the local population and paved the way for Syrians to choose this region. The legal status of Syrians in Turkey has been institutionalised through the Temporary Protection Regulation (GKY) implemented under the YUKK, which came into force in 2014.

This regulation defines the legal arrangements for Syrians who have sought refuge in Turkey en masse and provides for free education and health services as well as legal work permits for registered individuals. Despite changing political rhetoric and practices, the TPR continues to form the basic framework of Turkey's intervention policy towards Syrian refugees.

TABLE 1. Population in the Earthquake Zone.

Provinces	Turkish Citizens	Foreign Nationals			Grand Total
		Temporary Protection	Residence Permit	Total	
Adana	2.274.106	250.679	6.452	257.131	2.531.237
Adıyaman	632.148	21.688	450	22.138	654.286
Diyarbakır	1.804.880	21.727	1260	22.987	1.827.867
Elâzığ	591.497	12.188	801	12.989	604.468
Gaziantep	2.154.051	459.751	11.249	471.950	2.625.601
Hatay	1.686.043	354.549	8.400	357.929	2.043.472
Kahramanmaraş	1.177.436	94.888	2.144	97.032	1.274.468
Kilis	147.919	87.408	1.417	88.825	236.744
Malatya	812.580	31.427	1.345	32.772	845.352
Osmaniye	559.405	38.650	664	39.314	598.719
Şanlıurfa	1.170.110	369.145	4.269	373	2.543.524
Total	14.013.196	1.738.035	33.159	1.771.194	15.784.390
Turkey Grand Total	85.279.553	3.500.964	1.354.707	4.855.671	90.135.224
Turkey Rate	%16.43	%49	%2	%36	%17.51

Source: Sağiroğlu, A.Z., Ünsal, R. and Özenci, F. (2023). Migration and Human Movements after the 6 February 2023 Earthquake: Situation Assessment Report, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University Migration Policies Application and Research Center.

As can be seen from the table, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Hatay and Adana are the provinces with the highest number of foreign nationals, both in absolute terms and proportionally. Syrians under temporary protection constitute the largest group among foreign nationals. The situation in Kilis is noteworthy. In this province, which has a total population of 236,744, the proportion of foreign nationals is very high. The number of those under temporary protection is nearly equal to the number of Turkish citizens. Looking at the table as a whole, while the total number of foreign nationals in Turkey is 4,855,657, 36% of this number live in the 11 provinces affected by the earthquake. The settlement of Syrians in border regions close to their relatives in terms of language, religion, and culture has created cultural concentrations in certain areas.

Housing conditions and settlement issues

There are a total of 161 municipalities in the 11 provinces affected by the earthquake, accounting for approximately 11.6% of all municipalities in Turkey. 124 districts, or 12.7% of the districts in the region, and 1,300 villages, or 7.1% of the villages, are located in these provinces (SBB, 2023: 16).

TABLE 2. Number of Houses in Provinces Affected by Earthquakes (2022).

Provinces	Number of Residences
Adana	972.561
Adıyaman	216.744
Diyarbakır	563.295
Elâzığ	292.406
Gaziantep	893.558
Hatay	847.380
Kahramanmaraş	481.362
Kilis	74.976
Malatya	345.536
Osmaniye	243.436
Şanlıurfa	718.063
Regional Total	5.649.317
Türkiye	40.200.000

Source: 2023 Hatay Earthquakes Report, Strategy and Budget Directorate <https://www.sbb.gov.tr/>

According to TÜİK data, 5,649,357 of Turkey's total housing stock, or 14.05%, is located in 11 provinces that are earthquake zones (SBB, 2023: 36). Of these, 518,009 have been destroyed, 131,577 are moderately damaged, and 1,279,727 are slightly damaged (ÇŞB, 2023). According to official data, the earthquakes directly affected a total of approximately 15.7 million people, including 14 million Turkish citizens and approximately 1.7 million foreign nationals living in the 11 provinces most affected by the earthquake (SBB, 2024: 22). At the time of the earthquake, the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey had reached approximately 3.2 million. Forty-nine per cent of this population lives in the 11 provinces directly affected by the earthquakes. The number of Syrians living in the earthquake zone under temporary protection has been reported as 1,503,172. This number corresponds to 11.48 per cent of the total population in the region. The remaining approximately 200,000 people are refugees under international protection. It has been reported that a total of 50,783 people died in the earthquakes, 7,302 of whom were foreign nationals. It has been reported that the majority of foreign nationals who died were of Syrian origin (SBB, 2024: 9). This disaster has had far-reaching consequences not only in terms of loss of life and physical destruction but also in terms of its socio-demographic effects.

As shown in Table 1, Gaziantep (460,150), Şanlıurfa (368,223) and Hatay (354,648) stand out among the provinces in southeastern Turkey with high concentrations of Syrian refugees following the 6 February earthquake. The number of refugees is also quite high in provinces such as Adana, Kahramanmaraş, and Kilis. Compared to neighbouring countries, Turkey's 2014 YUKK is much more inclusive and protects the rights of refugees. The country supports the rights of refugees in terms of health, education, security, and work, but provides housing in container cities or designated buildings (Mavrouli et al., 2023). As a result, refugees are concentrated in cities with high demographic earthquake risk.

The lack of registration of refugees, the failure of the state to grant residence permits, the inadequacy of aid and rehabilitation efforts, or the inability to access accurate records have further increased the vulnerability of refugees. Furthermore, the mass influx of Syrian refugees has increased building occupancy rates and put pressure on housing stock, infrastructure, and urbanisation patterns. Resettlement in housing areas less preferred by the local population has further increased the vulnerability of refugees (Ruhnke et al., 2024: 3) and added them to the list of vulnerable groups affected by the disaster.

Although Turkey is the only country that includes refugees in its Disaster Risk Reduction policies, there is currently limited information available on the specific needs of refugees following an earthquake (Alexander, 2023). The literature reports that UNHCR camp refugees face a greater risk of displacement compared to those who integrate into local communities following natural disasters. A study by Haliloğlu Kahraman (2023) shows that Syrian refugees generally live in poor and illegal areas, in low-quality housing that is not earthquake-resistant and has structural risks, and that this group includes a high proportion of women, children and the elderly, thereby increasing their risk of being negatively affected by earthquakes. Similarly, Sevinin et al. (2023) reached a conclusion addressing the human rights violations and eviction of Syrian refugees from refugee camps to accommodate Turkish citizens who lost their homes. The limited space available for constructing temporary shelters or permanent living areas for local citizens in earthquake-affected regions has increased the risk of displacement, revealing that the state has provided housing opportunities for its own citizens through channels such as TOKİ. Ruhnke et al. (2024: 5) concluded that refugees remained in earthquake-affected cities despite the destruction of living spaces, rising unemployment, inflation, the depreciation of the Turkish Lira, and various economic problems. Bhat (2023: 10), in his study titled 'The Impact of the Turkey-Syria Earthquake on Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, and Somali Migrants and Refugees in Turkey,' refuted the thesis that environmental disasters lead to a high rate of forced migration and found that only 4% of refugees from the earthquake zone had moved or were considering moving.

Access to Healthcare

One of the important steps taken by the Republic of Turkey, particularly in terms of access to healthcare, was the establishment of Migrant Health Centres (MHC) in 2016, supported by European Union funds. What makes these centres unique is that they are staffed largely by Syrian healthcare professionals and offer a model that helps refugees overcome cultural and language barriers. Migrant Health Centres are a multidimensional example of integration policy in terms of both increasing access to healthcare and employing Syrian professionals.

The earthquake caused hospitals to collapse, infrastructure to be destroyed, and schools and educational institutions to be destroyed, creating conditions that led to service disruptions for both the local population and refugees. According to a report by the WHO (2023: 5), 15 hospitals in the region have been rendered unusable. Refugees faced risks such as infectious diseases, psychological trauma, and worsening chronic conditions due to the earthquake. Additionally, poor living conditions led to increased hygiene issues and the risk of infectious diseases (Çınar et al., 2023: 2). However, studies have also shown that there is no difference between the local population and refugees in terms of access to health and education services.

Nasir et al. (2025: 11) conducted a field study and found that refugees, like the local population, were victims of the earthquake and that humanitarian approaches, rather than racist approaches, prevailed in the aftermath of this disaster. Participants stated that medical and psychological support, including healthcare and medication, was mostly free of charge for affected individuals and survivors rescued from the rubble. The research revealed that active efforts were being made through collaboration between the state and civil society to prevent discrimination in healthcare services. Access to healthcare services for women and child refugees was given particular priority. Duruel (2023: 250) found that being a refugee is already a significant vulnerability, but that having previously experienced war, internal conflict, and torture has made them resilient to a certain extent; they have gained the ability to act calmly and make rational decisions without panicking in times of disaster; and that their previous experiences of homelessness and serious health problems have made it easier for them to adapt to difficult conditions.

Sudden and unexpected earthquakes have prevented aid from reaching those in need quickly and effectively during the earthquake, and have also caused losses among healthcare personnel due to the earthquake. The difficulties faced by Syrian refugees, who were already highly vulnerable due to their refugee status, have deepened and become more complex with this devastating earthquake disaster. Vulnerability has become layered and multidimensional; an individual may face multiple risk factors at the same time, such as being an earthquake victim, a refugee, a person with disabilities, and a woman.

Social integration and discrimination

Social integration is a situation in which individuals from different ethnic, cultural or socio-economic groups live in mutual understanding, trust and cooperation; a situation in which social cohesion is established on the basis of equal opportunities, participation and a sense of belonging. Social integration refers to the level of trust, community participation and access to fair opportunities among individuals in a society, while discrimination refers to unfair or exclusionary treatment based on characteristics such as gender, ethnic origin, language, religion, nationality, disability, age or migration status, which is almost the opposite of integration. Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights rejects discrimination, stating that “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Convention, without distinction of any kind. Such discrimination shall not be based on any of the following grounds: sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, membership of a national minority, or other status”. Although the earthquake created a common trauma for both the local population and the refugee communities concentrated in the region, the effects of this trauma varied depending on socio-economic status, legal status and social affiliation. In particular, social integration processes have become more fragile for Syrian refugees, and forms of discrimination have become more visible.

The literature emphasises that practices and public policies towards refugees do not offer a uniform approach and that there are significant differences between regions and actors. In this context, a complex picture has emerged in which both social integration is encouraged and discriminatory practices are observed. An important factor explaining this contradictory situation is political discourse and media representation. Populist rhetoric used by some opposition parties and local actors in the post-earthquake period has negatively affected social perceptions

of refugees (Ekici, 2024: 338). In particular, discriminatory language shaped by the rhetoric that ‘they do not deserve aid’ towards refugees on social media has also been reflected in local practices. Sevinin et al. (2023) note that refugees were removed from some camps and Turkish citizens were settled there, which triggered a sense of displacement among refugees for a second time. Sert et al. (2023) documented the difficulties faced by refugees after the 6 February earthquakes in their situation assessment field report. It has been noted that Syrian individuals face both discriminatory practices and visible exclusion at the political level in terms of access to housing, aid, and social services. Daniş et al. (2023), who prepared the third report, conducted field research with earthquake-affected refugees who migrated to Istanbul after the earthquake and noted that the results were different from what was expected. They stated that refugees did not come to Istanbul from the earthquake zone through internal migration, and that the reason for this was exclusionary policies and state policies that prevented refugees from going to large cities. They also focused on the housing discrimination and exclusionary attitudes that refugees faced in the aid process. It was revealed that migration policies can deviate from equality even in emergency conditions.

The government has generally tried to be inclusive and humane. The Ministry of the Interior and the Directorate General of Migration Management have emphasised that refugees have equal access to health and shelter services as Turkish citizens (<https://www.goc.gov.tr/>). The Ministry of Health has announced that mobile health units have been established for both Turkish citizens and refugees and that vaccination campaigns are being implemented without discrimination. However, statements aimed at softening public reactions towards refugees have been highlighted in the media. For example, statements such as ‘Refugees are not receiving aid; they do not have the same rights as the Turkish people’ have been framed to balance public reaction (<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/>).

These assessments show that political discourse on refugees in Turkey following the 6 February earthquakes harbours deep ideological differences. In the aftermath of the disaster, two fundamental and conflicting approaches towards refugees have emerged. The first approach addresses the issue in terms of ‘security’ and ‘national priorities’ and advocates exclusionary policies. In contrast, the second approach focuses on inclusive solutions, referring to the principles of ‘human rights’ and ‘universal equality.’

Social tensions surrounding which groups should have priority access to public resources and rights in times of crisis have emerged as one of the most significant structural barriers to the social integration of refugees. As noted in IOM’s 2024 report on crisis and solidarity, post-disaster rhetoric towards migrants is influenced much more by political divisions within society and media discourse than by the state’s capacity to intervene. According to the report, discriminatory or exclusionary political discourse during disaster periods can undermine the principle of rights-based equality in aid processes and jeopardise both the physical and social security of refugees (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024: 75). This situation clearly shows that the discourse of political actors goes beyond a discursive framework and directly shapes social policies, media language, and social perceptions.

Social exclusion and cultural differences

The earthquakes of 6 February were a turning point that revealed the fragility of the social structure. Refugee communities living densely in the earthquake zones were directly affected by the earthquake, yet they were subjected to various levels of social exclusion in their relations with the local population and in their access to public services. Prior to the earthquake, social tensions towards refugees in Turkey (particularly towards Syrians) were mostly related to economic hardship, competition in the labour market, and access to public resources. However, these reactions were mostly limited and did not become visible during times of mass crisis (Erdoğan, 2022: 22).

Social exclusion has been shaped by refugees being deprived not only of access to aid, but also of a sense of social belonging and integration with the local population. This form of exclusion has been exacerbated by structural factors such as the weakness of refugees' social networks, language and cultural barriers, economic poverty and lack of rights-based status. In particular, undocumented refugees or those who lost their documents in the earthquake faced greater difficulties in accessing temporary shelter, health and food assistance after the disaster (IOM, 2024: 76).

The example of Antakya also highlights the cultural aspects of this form of exclusion. According to Al Jazeera's March 2023 field report, strong local rhetoric that priority in post-earthquake aid should be given to 'citizens' has led to Syrian refugees being excluded from voluntary aid activities in some areas and even subjected to threats. The same report noted that young refugees in Antakya had left aid teams and were explicitly unwanted by some volunteer groups (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Erdoğan et al. (2023), who have made significant contributions to the literature, asked Syrians in Turkey about their relations with Turkish society in a project they conducted in the earthquake zone. The survey results paint a largely positive picture, with 85% of participants stating that they live with Turkish society 'without any problems.' The percentage of negative responses, such as 'Turks discriminate against us' (11.8%), 'We have problems with Turks' (2%), and 'Turks exploit us' (0.5%), was much lower (Erdoğan et al., 2023: 31-33). However, this perspective contradicts the findings of qualitative interviews with field workers (NGOs) who draw attention to important issues such as social tension and the deterioration of inter-community relations. NGOs have stated that discrimination and exclusion are not limited to the earthquake zone but are widespread throughout Turkey. In contrast, Syrian individuals who participated in the survey emphasised the role of institutional discrimination after the earthquake, stating: "At first, there was no discrimination among citizens; for example, both Syrian and Turkish citizens stayed together in sports halls without any problems. Discrimination was carried out by public institutions" (Erdoğan et al., 2023: 38).

This situation shows that cultural differences are not merely a source of diversity, but can also become a trigger for discrimination in times of crisis. Refugees' clothing styles, language use, religious practices, and different approaches to social norms can result in exclusion or marginalisation in their interactions with the local population (Erdoğan, 2022: 11). After the earthquake, it was observed that political rhetoric and media incitement sharpened the distinction between 'us' and 'them' in terms of cultural differences, particularly in aid relations. When combined with national identity rhetoric during times of crisis, such antagonisms lead to the exclusion of

refugees from both physical and symbolic spaces. According to Nasır et al. (2025), even NGOs assisting refugees in some regions have been targeted with accusations of treason and prioritisation bias (Nasır et al., 2025: 11-12).

The crisis and scarcity of resources experienced in the aftermath of the earthquake raised the question of ‘who should be given priority?’ among certain segments of society. During times of crisis, the binary distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ groups in need of assistance is not based solely on the legal status of individuals or communities; it is also constantly reproduced through socio-cultural determinants such as cultural identity, language, visibility in the public sphere, and social belonging. This selective and hierarchical understanding of aid can be fuelled and reinforced by certain populist discourses of political actors.

The provocative, discriminatory and disinformation-based language used by some media outlets has played a significant role in shaping social perceptions that have led to the exclusion of refugees from the aid process. In particular, unverified claims circulating on social media that ‘refugees are given priority in receiving aid’ have increased public opposition to refugees. This situation has forced aid organisations to issue statements on the matter (<https://multeci.org.tr/>).

Developing social integration strategies for refugees after disasters

Syrian refugees, in particular, as well as all vulnerable groups under international protection, have experienced multi-layered vulnerability due to both the direct effects of the disaster and discriminatory rhetoric during the reconstruction process. In this context, strategies developed to re-establish post-disaster social integration and the participation of refugees in social cohesion have been re-examined in the context of both national policies and international recommendations. However, this report overlooks the significant differences between local practices. Indeed, some metropolitan municipalities, such as Gaziantep, Konya, Diyarbakır, Adana and Van, have developed equitable aid policies in terms of both logistical and social support for disaster areas and have adopted a discourse that rejects discrimination against refugees (Ergün & Akman, 2025: 467).

The effective end of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 and the international community’s inclination to support the reconstruction process in Syria have inevitably affected policies regarding the future of Syrian refugees in Turkey. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees directly affected by the 2023 earthquakes have suffered both physical and social devastation in areas such as housing, health, employment and education, exacerbating their vulnerability. This dual crisis situation necessitates the simultaneous consideration of the options of ‘return, local integration and resettlement in a third country’ in migration policies.

Turkey and international actors are working with the central government in Syria to establish housing, education and health infrastructure for returning refugees. D’Angelo (2024: 44) argues that this type of reconstruction diplomacy is effective in reducing post-disaster trauma. For those remaining in the country, container cities and temporary settlements have been established by AFAD and the Directorate General of Migration Management. It has been documented that the refugee population is included in these areas and that basic humanitarian aid is provided by institutions such as the Red Crescent, SGDD-ASAM and UNHCR. Nutrition and hygiene kits for children and psychosocial support tents for women have been particularly prominent in this

process (UNHCR, 2023). In projects carried out in partnership with the Ministry of National Education and UNICEF, 'integration classes' have been created to enable refugee children to continue their education, and portable classroom solutions have been developed to ensure that their education is not interrupted. Additionally, Turkish language courses conducted at Community Education Centres have supported the social integration of young and adult refugees in particular (UNICEF, 2023).

The earthquake on 6 February deeply affected the living conditions of Syrian refugees living in the Hatay region in particular, exacerbating the existing economic, psychological and social vulnerabilities caused by the Syrian crisis. Disasters cause the destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods, leading to deeper poverty and vulnerability, especially among refugee communities. In the context of refugees, the destruction of homes has led to a decrease in alternative housing options, an increase in housing prices, and a rise in financial burdens. Additionally, many refugees have lost their jobs due to the destruction of workplaces, increasing their dependence on humanitarian aid and forcing them to work in low-wage reconstruction projects. This economic deterioration parallels other crises, such as the second displacement and impoverishment experienced by refugees in South Sudan following the 2023 flood disaster (<https://www.msf.org/>).

In this sense, the issue of employing refugees in Turkey has become even more important in the post-disaster period. Projects carried out in collaboration with the Employment and Skills Development Project (UNDP) and İŞKUR have provided vocational training courses, work permit information activities and livelihood support for refugees. The aim has been to register refugee labour in the textile, agriculture and food sectors in particular (UNDP, 2023). Afghan refugees mostly have international protection applicant status and therefore have more limited rights than Syrians. However, after the earthquake, Afghan refugees living in the earthquake-affected areas were also provided with shelter and access to basic services. However, during this process, Afghans who entered the country illegally and without documentation were deported. To prevent illegal entry, the capacity of control and deportation centres in border regions was increased, while urban social service mechanisms were also developed (3RP, 2024: 30-32).

In 2023, there was an increase in work permits issued to foreigners in Turkey compared to the previous year. According to data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the number of work permits, which was 212,682 in 2022, increased by 12.8% to 239,835 in 2023. This increase indicates that Turkey's need for migrant labour continues and that the permit processes are being carried out regularly. Additionally, the Ministry has expanded its data presentation this year and has begun reporting on other legal forms of employment besides work permits. Accordingly, a total of 329,066 permits were issued in 2023. Of these permits, 72.9% were standard work permits (239,835), 23.3% were work permit exemption information forms issued to foreigners working in seasonal agriculture and livestock farming (76,707), 3.7% were general work permit exemptions (12,090), and 0.1% were permits issued to foreigners working in free zones (434). In the same year, a total of 407,481 applications were received, and 80.8% of these applications were approved and resulted in permits. These data indicate that Turkey's integration of foreign labour into its labour market is continuing at the institutional level and that the transition to formal employment is being supported (GAV, 2024).

Integration policies for refugees in Turkey vary according to their legal status and social needs. Comprehensive state support is provided for Syrians, while services for Afghans are limited and mainly provided by NGOs and international actors. Following the 2023 earthquakes, strengthening integration policies, resolving legal status uncertainties, and expanding inclusive social services are urgent needs for both groups. All refugees in Turkey who were forced to leave their homes and resettle due to war and internal conflict first experienced increased vulnerability during the Covid-19 pandemic and then experienced 'multi-layered vulnerability' after the earthquake. This is a common experience shared by other refugee communities around the world. Internally displaced persons in Syria, Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Sudanese civilians, and the Rohingya community are the most notable examples in this context (<https://www.unhcr.org/pk/>). As Hallegatte and colleagues emphasise, the socio-economic impacts of disasters exacerbate existing poverty conditions and lead to greater vulnerability among displaced individuals. Therefore, the needs of migrant and refugee communities must be specifically addressed in disaster response strategies (Hallegatte et al., 2018: 33-34). These disasters highlight the need for disaster resilience policies for refugees to go beyond humanitarian aid and integrate the specific needs of refugees into disaster management systems.

The fall of the Assad regime at the end of 2024 and the emergence of reconstruction processes in Syria have led to the adoption of a new return-focused strategy in Turkey's migration policies. However, this does not mean that integration policies for the millions of Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey will be terminated. Indeed, while the Directorate General of Migration Management and local authorities are calling for 'voluntary return,' inclusive integration policies are being maintained for those who choose to remain in the country. This dual approach highlights the need for Turkey to undertake comprehensive efforts that both encourage return and support permanent integration.

CONCLUSION

The earthquakes centred in Kahramanmaraş on 6 February deeply affected millions of people living in southeastern Turkey, especially refugee communities, and made existing vulnerabilities even more visible and profound. This study has detailed how the multidimensional vulnerabilities faced by refugees in Turkey during their social integration process have been exacerbated by a major natural disaster such as an earthquake. Shortages in basic needs such as shelter, health, education and employment have increased the vulnerability of these groups in the aftermath of the disaster, while structural barriers such as legal status, language barriers and economic inadequacies have made it difficult for refugees to integrate into society.

The physical destruction and economic hardship caused by the earthquake have exacerbated the already fragile situation of refugees, while disruptions in post-disaster relief efforts and social exclusion have posed a serious obstacle to social integration. The concentration of refugees in the earthquake zone has exacerbated their housing problems and difficulties in accessing services. In particular, the inadequacy of housing stock that has been destroyed or severely damaged has forced refugees to live in insecure and substandard conditions, thereby increasing both physical and psychosocial health risks.

Although regulations regarding access to healthcare services and institutions such as Migrant Health Centres provide significant support, the destruction of infrastructure and loss of healthcare personnel caused by the disaster have limited refugees' access to healthcare services. Post-earthquake psychological trauma, infectious disease risks, and the worsening of chronic diseases have become widespread among refugees. In the field of education, innovative practices such as adaptation classes and mobile education models developed to enable children to continue their schooling offer hope, but damage to the general education infrastructure and difficult economic conditions have increased interruptions in the education of refugee children, as well as all children in the region.

One of the important findings of the study is the direct impact of the discourse used by political actors and the media in the post-earthquake period on social perception and the social integration process of refugees. This is significant in terms of demonstrating the impact of political polarisation in Turkey on the social exclusion and discrimination of refugees. Field studies and surveys have found that both the local population and refugee communities are generally satisfied with mutual integration and coexistence, thus revealing a discrepancy between political discourse and social reality.

When examining the state's social integration strategies for refugees after the earthquake, differences in implementation between the central government and local administrations can be observed. While some municipalities continue to provide equitable services to refugees, discriminatory practices by some municipalities may hinder social integration. Comprehensive programmes have been implemented at the central level to increase refugees' access to health, education and social services, but these programmes need to be strengthened due to the needs and vulnerabilities that have emerged in the aftermath of the disaster.

This study clearly shows that disasters, especially earthquakes, increase the vulnerability of refugee communities, disrupt social integration processes, and deepen social exclusion. In this context, new strategies should be developed at the intersection of disaster management and social integration policies. Disaster responses should not be limited to repairing physical damage; they should be designed to address the social, psychological, and economic needs of refugees. Policies to combat discrimination, inclusive service delivery, and educational programmes that enhance cultural empathy should be prioritised to establish social peace and integration.

Turkey's experience in refugee integration has made significant contributions to international literature, but current challenges and ideological conflicts threaten the sustainability of integration. Therefore, post-disaster policies for refugees must go beyond the humanitarian aid perspective and be consistent with long-term social integration goals. The use of constructive, inclusive and realistic language in political discourse and the media is critical to increasing social acceptance of refugees and reducing discrimination.

Finally, the regime change and reconstruction process in Syria in 2024 will take Turkey's refugee policies to a new level. This process requires not only supporting voluntary returns but also re-examining the integration process for refugees who choose to stay in Turkey. Incentive mechanisms and support packages should be created to ensure that returns are voluntary, safe, and dignified. On the other hand, long-term and inclusive social policies should be implemented for refugees who choose to remain in Turkey. This comprehensive approach will make a significant contribution to resolving the refugee issue.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- 3RP, (2024). Türkiye Ülke Bölümü 2023 – 2025, 2024 Yılı Güncellemesi, <https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/3RP-Turkiye-Chapter-2024-Update-TR.pdf>
- AİHS. (2025). Avrupa İnsan Hakları Sözleşmesi, Türkçe Metin için: https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_tur
- Al Jazeera, (2023). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/6/quake-hit-antakya-communities-see-role-in-saving-rich-heritage> 20.05.2025
- Al Mandhar, A. (2023). Earthquakes as triggers for public health disasters: WHO and health systems' response, *East Mediterr Health J.* 29(3).165– 167.
- Alexander, D. (2023) Reflections on the Turkish-Syrian Earthquakes of 6th February 2023: Building Collapse and its Consequences, <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/irdr/2023/02/09/reflections-on-the-turkish-syrian-earthquakes/> E.T. 07.05.2025
- Angın, C. (2024). Afet Yönetiminde Yapay Zekâ: Yaklaşımlar, Yöntemler ve Uygulamalar. *Türk Deprem Araştırma Dergisi*, 6(2), 610-627. <https://doi.org/10.46464/tdad.1532261>
- Bhat, S. (2023). *Türkiye Syria earthquake's impact on Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi and Somali refugees in Türkiye*. Mixed Migration Centre <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/turkiye-syria-earthquake-impact/>
- Çınar, E. N., Abbara, A. and Yılmaz, E. (2023). Earthquakes in Turkey and Syria—collaboration is needed to mitigate longer term risks to health, *BMJ*, 380:p559, doi: 10.1136/bmj.p559
- Çuhadar, P. (2019). Kırılğan Devlet ve Zorunlu Göç İlişkisini Suriye Üzerinden Okumak. *Göç Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 5(1), 28-49.
- D'Angelo, M. (2024). Helping my Friends: Rethinking Disaster Diplomacy in the Wake of 1999 and 2023 Seismic Events in Turkey, Syria and Greece. In *Helping My Friends: Disaster Diplomacy and Refugees Post-2023 Earthquake*. POLIARCHIE.
- Danış, D., Biehl, K. & Kablan, E. (2023). Göç ve Deprem, İstanbul'a Gelen Depremzede Mültecilere Yönelik Kabul ve Dışlama Mekanizmaları, Durum Tespit Raporu III, Göç Araştırmaları Derneği.
- Duruel, M. (2023). Afetlerde Göçmen Olmak: 6 Şubat Depremi Hatay Örneği, *Mukaddime*, 14(2), 227-255.
- Ekici, S. (2024). Deprem sonrası Suriyeli göçmenlerin yaşadıkları sorunlar. *Akademik Yaklaşımlar Dergisi*, 15(1), Deprem Özel Sayısı, 334-365.
- Erdoğan, M. M. (2022). Suriyeliler Barometresi 2021: Suriyelilerle Uyum İçinde Yaşam. Ankara: Orion Kitabevi.
- Erdoğan, M. M., Ferris, E., Donato, K., Kirişçi, K., Erkmen, S., Eminoğlu, N., Yaylacı, Ş. and Mohammad, T. H. (2023). *Social Cohesion Of Syrian Refugees In Türkiye and Conditions For Idps In Syria After The Earthquake February 6, 2023*, Igam Academy.
- Ergün, G. & Akman, Ç. (2025). Local Digital Transformation Studies in the Case of Konya Metropolitan Municipality. In *Digital Competency Development for Public Officials: Adapting New Technologies in Public Services* (pp. 453-474). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

- GAV. (2024). Göç Araştırma Vakfı, Türkiye’de Göç Trendleri: 2023 Yılı Uluslararası İş Gücü ve Çalışma İzinleri İstatistikleri, <https://gocvakfi.org/turkiyede-goc-trendleri-2023-yili-uluslararasi-is-gucu-ve-calisma-izinleri-istatistikleri/>
- Haliloğlu Kahraman, Z.E. (2023). Kahramanmaraş ve Hatay Depremlerinin Düşündürdükleri: Suriyeli Mültecilerin Yer Seçim Kararlarının Deprem Tehlikeleri ve Riskleri Açısından Değerlendirilmesi. *Planlama Dergisi*, 33(3), 506-514.
- Hallegatte, S., Rentschler, J., and Walsh, B. (2018). Building back better: achieving resilience through stronger, faster, and more inclusive post-disaster reconstruction. World Bank, Washington, D.C., USA, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/df6fdd97-74d2-504f-b3a3-02daad568235/content>
- <https://multeci.org.tr/2023/02/13/afette-depremezede-multecilere-yonelik-tutumlar-endise-verici/> E.T:12.05.2025
- <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-toplumda-yabanci-dusmanligini-ve-siginmaci-nefretini-korukleyerek-hicbir-yere-varilamaz/3262796> 12.05.2025
- <https://www.msf.org/sudan>
- IOM (2024). <https://turkiye.iom.int/tr/uyum> E.T:25.05.2025
- Kayali, N. (2020). Syrian refugees navigate Turkey’s shifting health care terrain. *MERIP. Orta Doğu Araştırma ve Bilgi Projesi*, <https://merip.org/2020/11/syrian-refugees-navigate-turkeys-shifting-health-care-terrain/>
- Mavrouli, M., Mavroulis, S., Lekkas, E. and Tsakris, A. (2023). An Emerging Health Crisis in Turkey and Syria after the Earthquake Disaster on 6 February 2023: Risk Factors, Prevention and Management of Infectious Diseases. *Healthcare (Basel)*. 3;11(7):1022. [doi: 10.3390/healthcare11071022](https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11071022).
- McAuliffe, M. and L.A. Ouchou (eds.), 2024. *World Migration Report 2024*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva.
- Nasır, A., Alymany, G., Brimo, F., Tekin, S. and Drury, J. (2025). Understanding the socio-economic and wellbeing impacts of the 2023 earthquakes in Turkey on Syrian refugees, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, University of Sussex. Journal contribution. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.29070422.v1>
- Ruhnke, S., Hertner, L., Gundacker, L. and Wagner, S. (2024). Going from bad to worse? Wellbeing of Syrian refugees in Turkey in the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes. Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany. <https://doi.org/10.18452/28152>
- Sağiroğlu, A. Z., Ünsal, R. ve Özenci, F. (2023). *6 Şubat 2023 Deprem Sonrası Göç ve İnsan Hareketlilikleri: Durum Değerlendirme Raporu*, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt Üniversitesi Göç Politikaları Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi.
- SBB. (2023). *2023 Kahramanmaraş ve Hatay Depremleri Raporu*, T.C. S strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı. SBB Deprem Sonrası Değerlendirme Raporu.
- SBB. (2024). *Kahramanmaraş ve Hatay Depremleri Yeniden İmar ve Gelişme Raporu*, T.C. Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı.
- Semerci, P.U., Danış, D., Birol, B. ve Turan, D. (2023). Deprem Bölgesinde Göçmen / Sığınmacı / Mülteci Olmak, *Reflektif Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2): 469-483
- Sert, D., Danış, D. ve Sevinin, E. (2023). *Durum Tespit Raporu, Göç ve Deprem, Göç Araştırmaları Derneği*.

- Sevinin, E., Danış, D. and Sert, D. (2023). Double Displacement of Refugees in the Context of the 2023 Turkey-Syria Earthquake. *International Migration*, 61(4), 341-344. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13171>
- UNDP, (2023). UNDP, deprem bölgesinde toparlanmaya yönelik bir adım olarak Türkiye’de tekstil sektöründe istihdamı destekliyor <https://www.undp.org/tr/turkiye/press-releases/undp-deprem-bolgesinde-toparlanmaya-yonelik-bir-adim-olarak-turkiyede-tekstil-sektorunde-istihdami-destekliyor> E.T:05.05.2025
- UNHCR, (2023). <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/node/18> E.T:22.04.2025
- UNICEF, (2023). <https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/unicefin-deprem-mudehalesi> E.T:22.04.2025