How the Syrian Refugee Crisis has been Securitized in Turkish Domestic Politics

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The notion of security has experienced substantial transformation and reshaping throughout the years. As stated by David Baldwin, there is an increasing pattern of redefining security, where the concept of security is no longer limited to military dangers but now encompasses other new challenges. Following the Arab Spring and many worldwide crises, there has been an increasing acknowledgement of the movement of refugees as a security concern. Although it may be difficult to articulate the reasons

why migration presents a security risk, modern theoretical concepts like the Copenhagen School offer a structured approach to comprehending the fundamental factors implicated. However, it is equally crucial to know whether the ruling elite's "securitized" perspective on the problem actually represents a security issue.

Securitization is currently a popular notion in Turkey, endorsed by well-known scholars. The response of Turkish society to the idea of considering migration as a national security issue is significant. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that cultural identity and the utilization of propaganda also play a substantial role in the securitization process. According to the UNHCR, Turkey currently hosts around 3,3 million registered Syrian refugees and continues to be the largest refugee-hosting country in Europe and second in the world. Turkey strategically leveraged this refugee influx to apply economic and political pressure on the European Union. Since 2011, the European Union has provided Turkey with about €10 billion in assistance to address the refugee crisis. In addition, Turkey also used the refugee situation to accomplish its political and military objectives. Although the refugee issue served as a useful political instrument, it posed several challenges for society. Prior to the 2019 local elections in Turkey, studies indicated that the average level of security concern regarding Syrian refugees stood at approximately 71.7 per cent. The concerns centred mostly on the accessibility of a cheap labour force, the possibility of Syrians displacing local workers, their engagement in illegal activities, and the potential deterioration of government-provided public services as a result of the increased number of refugees. At that point, the opposition parties started to use the refugee issue in domestic politics.

As Turkish policymakers analysed the situation, they focused on security-related issues such as border security, the possibility of social unrest, economic consequences, and the risk of extremist infiltration inside refugee communities. Following that sense, the Victory Party (VP), founded post-2021 and famous for its anti-immigration stance, has gained significant popularity in both society and internal politics. Like other right-wing approaches, the VP supported welfare benefits for Turkish citizens while limiting access for non-Turkish individuals. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are individuals who may claim that seeing refugees solely through the lens of security can be detrimental to humanitarian principles and can deepen social differences. In domestic politics, a more balanced approach that prioritizes human dignity and international duties while also addressing valid security concerns has been asked for by organizations that are part of civil society and advocate for human rights. After the 2024 local elections in Turkey, where the Justice and Development Party (JDP) suffered a defeat, concerns were raised regarding the party's effectiveness in dealing with the security issues related to refugees.

Over time, Turkish society's primary stance towards Syrian migrants shifted from perceiving them as "victims" to considering them as a "threat".

Given that the concept of sovereignty in today's world is commonly associated with borders and the protection of those borders, the unauthorized flow of refugees creates an obstacle to the sovereign security of Turkish societies. Over the years, the JDP's open-door policy has evolved into a distinct position in society, particularly as the issue of refugees has become more securitized. Although Turkey's involvement in several Middle Eastern issues is significant due to its location, it presents a distinct challenge for the JDP to maintain an optimal balance between addressing security challenges, using refugees for political advantage, and respecting humanitarian ideals.

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