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## Youth Co-Radicalisation in Türkiye – New Conflict-Induced Migration

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**Turkish migration to Western Europe, particularly Germany, has been driven by economic aspirations and socio-political conflicts. Since 2013, a new wave of highly skilled young Turks has migrated to Western states due to political instability. At the same time, a concerning trend emerging in Türkiye's marginalised urban areas is the co-radicalisation of Turkish citizens and refugees fuelled by political and socio-economic tensions. This process, exacerbated by political actors exploiting cultural and civilizational divisions, could lead to a new wave of conflict-induced migration to Europe. To prevent this, proactive policies fostering dialogue and inclusive social programmes are needed, with adjusted support schemes to address root causes before they escalate.**

EU-Türkiye relations have become truly transactional since the early 2010s. In this transactional relationship, migration and asylum cover an extensive volume of transactions that requires both sides to continue collaborating with other policy fields, such as trade, energy, security, counterterrorism, and the environment. The 2016 EU-Türkiye Refugee Statement was a landmark moment in this evolving transactional relationship.

Migration from Türkiye has traditionally been analysed through an economic lens, particularly concerning labour migration to Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. However, ethno-cultural, class-based, and religious-political conflicts also played an equally significant role in shaping migratory movements from Türkiye. In recent years, burgeoning socio-economic and political conflicts have added another layer of complexity to the broader movement of people in and out of the country. The migration of highly skilled Turkish citizens to Europe, especially Germany, increased after the 2013 Gezi protests and 2016 Turkish coup attempt.

Türkiye has also emerged as a key host country for refugees fleeing regional conflicts. Political upheaval in Iran (the Iranian Revolution 1977—1979), American military interventions in Iraq (1991 Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War), and, more recently, the Syrian Civil War (2011—2024) and the takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan (2021) have driven large numbers of displaced people into Türkiye. As a result of its open-door policy, Türkiye became the world's largest refugee-hosting country between

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2012 and 2023, in contrast to the restrictive asylum policies of many Western states. More recently, conflicts in former Soviet territories have further contributed to migration into Türkiye, including the arrival of Ukrainians fleeing war and Russians facing political repression.

Growing ethno-cultural and religious encounters in Türkiye are fuelling conflicts between young Turkish citizens and refugee peers in the outskirts of urban areas. Both groups are blaming each other for daily hardships and radicalising amid shared struggles with destitution, unemployment, poverty, exclusion, humiliation, and subordination. This *co-radicalisation* may drive new waves of conflict-driven migration to Europe.

The term *co-radicalisation* was first used in the psychology literature and arose from the observation that intergroup conflicts generate intergroup hostility through ideological extremization or increases existing ones. These intergroup conflicts have a propensity to perpetuate themselves through cycles of reciprocal threat, violence, and extremization. However, an alternative perspective from social movements theory views co-radicalisation as a broader process of ideological transformation, which is not necessarily violent, but can emerge as a response to structural inequalities, political disenfranchisement, and resentment in daily life.

A recent European Research Council study explored co-radicalisation between right-wing nativist and Muslim youths in Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. This dynamic, also seen in tensions between local Turks and refugees in Türkiye, highlights how political narratives deepen societal divisions. Addressing these challenges requires policies that foster social cohesion and reduce radicalisation and co-radicalisation.

## Youth radicalisation in Türkiye

Radicalisation has been described as a broader process of ideological transformation, which is not necessarily violent, but can emerge as a response to socio-economic, political, spatial, and psychological forms of deprivation in daily life. However, *co-radicalisation* further expands upon this framework by examining how hostility between social groups develops even in the absence of direct interaction.

Türkiye has seen significant shifts in youth activism over the decades, from mass mobilisations in the 1970s advocating for liberty, equality, and justice to increasing Islamisation since the early 2000s. However, efforts to shape a religiously conservative generation have faced pushback, particularly among youth from religious institutions. Rising trends toward secularism, deism, and atheism signal dissatisfaction with state-led social engineering. Meanwhile, the collapse of the Kurdish peace process between 2013 and 2015 has deepened divisions, especially in urban centres.

Additionally, Türkiye still hosts the second-largest refugee population globally, further influencing youth radicalisation dynamics. Social and economic exclusion, coupled with political instability, has fuelled grievances among both host and refugee communities, necessitating more inclusive policies to mitigate the tensions and co-radicalisation between them.

## Tensions between local populations and migrants

Since 2015, negative perceptions of Syrian refugees have grown in Türkiye, fuelled by public figures, including conservative-religious intellectuals. This rhetoric echoes a historical narrative from the late Ottoman period, where Arabs were seen as disloyal for allegedly aligning with Western powers. These stereotypes persist, especially among younger generations, who encounter them through digital media and nationalist education, leading to societal anxieties over identity and economic insecurity.

Tensions between local populations and migrant communities residing on the outskirts of large cities in Türkiye often stem from economic hardship. In the process of

co-radicalisation, local citizens may harbour resentment toward migrants due to perceived economic burdens, while migrants and refugees often feel exploited as cheap labour in their host countries. Having endured violence, displacement, and continued hardship, Syrian refugees in Türkiye — particularly children and young people — face heightened vulnerability to radicalisation, among other significant risks. If left unaddressed, this issue could become one of the most lasting and consequential impacts of the Syrian conflict in Türkiye.

Among the Syrian refugees in Türkiye, only a small fraction has managed to establish businesses or work independently, while the vast majority remain in low-skilled, precarious, and informal employment. Although the temporary protection scheme has allowed access to the labour market, as of August 2024, only 108,000 Syrians had been granted work permits across Türkiye. Given that the number of Syrians of working age exceeds 950,000, this suggests that most rely on informal jobs and social aid, living under conditions of extreme poverty and the hunger threshold.

Refugees in Türkiye are often blamed for strained public services, rising prices, and unemployment. While the government promotes cultural and religious ties to encourage acceptance, public perception reveals a significant divide. Structural barriers — such as limited communication access, language issues, and safety concerns — prevent refugees from challenging these views. Opinion surveys in Türkiye show that public attitudes toward Syrian refugees remain fluid and shift over time.

The pivotal moment came during local elections in the summer of 2019, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost control of major cities, such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Adana, Antalya, and Mersin. Since then, both the AKP and opposition parties have increasingly converged in their rhetoric, collectively attributing societal and political problems to refugees. Referring to the notion of *Ansar* (helper in Arabic) that reminds the Turks of the story of early Muslim helpers from Medina who supported the immigrant Muslims from Mecca alongside the Prophet Muhammad, AKP leadership has often framed the support to the Syrian refugees within the contours of a religious form of hospitality.

The earlier narratives of hospitality toward Syrian refugees gradually gave way to resentment and scapegoating nationwide, including within the AKP elite. Recently, the political discourse shifted from the rhetoric of *Ansar* to a focus on refugee repatriation, as the ruling elite and the oppositional parties sought to capitalise on anti-refugee sentiments amid growing socio-economic and political unrest.

The discursive shift also became visible in the speeches of the former Minister of Interior, Süleyman Soylu, who gave detailed accounts of Syrian returnees in his monthly organised press conferences in 2018 and 2019. Following the loss of municipal elections in Istanbul, the Governor, Ali Yerlikaya announced that Syrians under temporary protection residing in the city without proof of documents showing Istanbul as their city of registration would be deported to the cities where they were initially registered or Syria. These changes in policy practices demonstrate that what has been happening to Syrians is not only a discursive shift, but also an actual transformation of policies and practices from *Ansar* to an emphasis on the return of Syrian refugees.

The emphasis on the return of Syrian refugees by state actors continued after Ali Yerlikaya became the new Minister of Interior in June 2023. According to the latest figures given by the Interior Minister, the total number of Syrians who have returned to Syria since 2017 was 792,625 as of 9 January 2025. According to the official figures, as of 12 February 2025, the number of Syrians under temporary protection is 2,838,292 people, while the number of Syrians granted Turkish citizenship has reached 238,768 people as of December 2023. However, the return discourse became popular again following the liberation of Syria from Bashar al-Assad on 8 December 2024.

## Economic and social challenges equally hit both groups

In Türkiye, socio-economic deprivation and political polarisation affect both citizens and immigrants, with urban youth facing insecure labour markets and limited social security. This economic precariousness increases stress for both residents and municipalities. Refugee communities living below the poverty line struggle with child labour, school dropouts, and informal work. The mass migration of Syrians has placed additional economic pressure on the host society, contributing to rising unemployment and negatively impacting vulnerable local populations, especially in informal sectors.

Young residents of major cities like Istanbul, Gaziantep, Bursa, Adana, Şanlıurfa, Mersin, and Izmir voice concerns about the high number of refugees in their neighbourhoods. However, their frustration is not necessarily driven by anti-refugee sentiments, but rather by a perception of being "unloved" by the state and neglected by public authorities. Many citizens have expressed a sense of abandonment, believing that the AKP government has prioritised refugees over its citizens.

Refugee youth often share socio-economic grievances, with poverty, marginalisation, and exclusion heightening their vulnerability to radicalisation. Thrust into early adulthood or left without opportunities, many face deep deprivation. Limited access to education and job skills block integration, fostering disillusionment that can lead to crime and extremism. Segregated urban ghettoes further entrench their marginalisation, creating fertile ground for radical narratives.

A 2021 World Bank study found that the low-wage informal employment of refugees significantly displaced Turkish workers. Despite the correlation with the informal employment of nearly one million Syrians, Türkiye's unemployment rate rose from 8.15% in 2012 to 13.92% in 2020. Although the right to work was formalised in January 2016, its implementation remains largely exclusionary. Data reveal significant barriers to formal employment for Syrians and other more irregular migrants from Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. According to the Presidency of Migration Management, nearly 20% of Syrians are aged 10-18, with low schooling rates, particularly in secondary education, likely driving many into informal employment.

Many locals view migrants as competition for jobs and resources, fostering resentment. The right-wing populist party, Zafer Partisi (Victory Party, ZP), established in 2021, has capitalised on this sentiment, blaming refugees for economic insecurities and inequality. Migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan face compounded challenges, inheriting the poverty of marginalised communities and fuelling perceptions of them as threats rather than victims. Similar to other right-wing parties in Europe, the ZP has exploited these insecurities, deepening divides between young citizens and refugees.

## Conspiracy theories and nativism have become widespread

In a 2021 press release, the ZP claimed that migration from the Middle East was depopulating northern Syria and transferring its population to Türkiye, ultimately leading to the creation of a "PKK'istan" in Rojava. The party argued that the Syrian refugee issue was not about humanitarian solidarity, but part of an imperialist plot targeting both Turkish and Syrian communities. Using the concept of "weapons of mass migration," the ZP rejected the view of these movements as humanitarian and instead framed them as part of a strategy to reshape the Middle East's post-World War I geopolitical landscape. ZP leader Ümit Özdağ defended his party's stance on repatriation, arguing that opposing displacement, particularly in the context of rising tensions, is not racist.

Ümit Özdağ was arrested on 21 January 2025 on charges of inciting violence through a series of anti-refugee posts on social media. It is striking to see some parallels between the content of the ZP press releases and their counterparts' discourses in

Europe. For instance, explaining the mass migration of Syrians to Türkiye through various conspiracy theories resembles the infamous The Great Replacement argument by Renaud Camus, a right-wing French ideologue. Furthermore, the ZP's making the analogy of "PPK'istan", which is meant to be the land of the Kurds in Rojava, is reminiscent of analogies in Europe, e.g., Eurabia, made by right-wing populist actors like Geert Wilders to spread the fear that Europe is becoming the new Arabia.

## Social media intensifies the tensions

The media amplify tensions between local citizens and migrant-origin groups, particularly through social media where anti-refugee rhetoric is often circulated among the members of the majority society. Migrant communities organise through civil society organisations (CSOs), often using religious rhetoric to advocate for their rights. This has led to further polarisation, especially in debates around migration, secularism, and national identity.

Migrant populations often lack the cultural and economic capital to organise within Turkish institutions like political parties and labour unions. In response, some CSOs, particularly those using religious rhetoric (e.g., Özgürder), have framed migrants as the "Ansar" and mobilised protests on their behalf. This positioning contributes to Türkiye's already polarised ideological landscape. For instance, during debates on the migration of Afghan and Pakistani men, social media accounts in Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto spread anti-secularist rhetoric, targeting Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the secular regime, with the ZP playing a key role in amplifying these claims on social media.

Street interviews shared on popular YouTube channels like *Ilave TV, Halk Ekrani,* and *Ahsen TV* have amplified anti-Syrian refugee sentiments in Türkiye, reaching millions. These interviews often feature untrained individuals asking provocative questions, spreading intolerance and misinformation. Notably, *Ahsen TV* is operated by political Islamist nationalists linked to the *Ismailaga Cemaati*, a group of strong AKP supporters

Street interviews highlight common drivers of anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye, including beliefs that Syrians take jobs from locals, receive unfair benefits, and should return home. Misconceptions about education access and security risks further fuel hostility. These narratives — amplified by limited media freedom — have sparked violence and shifted public opinion, increasingly framing Syrians as a burden. Local media and social media channels continue to broadcast these tensions emerging between local citizens and refugees, although the AKP-controlled mainstream media tend to undermine such news.

## Hostility towards migrants increases

A central argument within the anti-migration discourse in Türkiye is that Syrian migrants have become the majority in southern cities, particularly in regions extending from Şanlıurfa to Mersin. In these areas, campaigners have directed their rhetoric at both the local population and state authorities, highlighting concerns about the perceived dangers of demographic change. This is an argument that the right-wing ZP often capitalises. Cities, such as Antakya, where Arabs and Turks have coexisted for centuries have become focal points in these discussions.

In recent years, violent clashes between local citizens and refugees have been escalating at an alarming rate in Türkiye. This manifests as a particular form of religious nationalism, where some local young Turkish citizens perceive refugees as insufficiently loyal to national and religious values. This tension is often heightened in economically disadvantaged districts of large cities, where incidents of violence or aggression, such as those in Istanbul's Bağcılar, Esenyurt, and Esenler districts, serve as micro-level examples of *co-radicalisation* between youth groups.

These tensions in large cities are also exacerbated in the aftermath of disasters like the 2023 earthquakes in Southeast Türkiye, where competition for resources and rising discrimination against migrants intensified. Following the earthquakes in 2023, which displaced thousands, including both Turkish and Syrian residents, there were reports of increased discrimination and hostility, particularly concerning petty crime.

On the night of August 11 2021, violence erupted in Ankara's Altındağ district as hundreds of locals attacked Syrian refugees' homes in retaliation for the alleged killing of a Turkish youth by Syrians. What started as anger quickly escalated into chaos, with Syrian businesses looted and destroyed by an uncontrolled mob. The Altındağ riots sent shockwaves across Türkiye intensifying the national debate over the growing refugee population and highlighting deepening societal fractures.

Similarly, in late June 2024, rumours spread in Kayseri, a town in central Anatolia, alleging that a young Syrian boy had assaulted a Turkish girl. These claims sparked large-scale protests against refugees in the city, which soon escalated into similar clashes between locals and refugee communities in major cities like Istanbul, Bursa, Hatay, Gaziantep, and Konya. Growing tensions between the two groups across Türkiye were met with a response from Syrians living in Turkish-controlled areas of Northern Syria, including al-Bab, Afrin, and Azaz, where protesters publicly burned Turkish flags.

## Refugee youth radicalise as a response to socio-economic and socio-political grievances

It is well-established that youth unemployment — more so than overall unemployment — and its proportion within the general population is a significant factor influencing the radicalisation of refugee youth, including their potential susceptibility to jihadist ideologies. Furthermore, socio-economic disenchantment in Türkiye, coupled with exclusionary mechanisms imposed by the majority of society, has been shown to increase the likelihood of refugee youth identifying with ongoing conflict dynamics, leading to heightened alienation and hindering integration. In this context, the persistently high rates of long-term unemployment among the predominantly young Syrian refugee population must be viewed as a considerable risk factor.

Key push factors for refugee radicalisation include chronic trauma, limited access to education, and systemic exclusion. Combined with prolonged unemployment, these conditions can steer vulnerable youth toward radical groups. Research warns of the risks when these factors converge in radicalising environments.

## Co-radicalisation and fragmentation of the social

Youth radicalisation in Türkiye is influenced by a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors, with new forms of activism emerging as traditional movements decline. Addressing this requires inclusive policies that guide youth grievances into democratic, non-violent engagement. Co-radicalisation, fuelled by economic pressures, religious nationalism, and political ideologies, exacerbates tensions between locals and migrants. Structural inequalities and divisive political discourse deepen these divides. Refugee stigmatisation, influenced by political narratives, is key to this dynamic, with the AKP's *Ansar* discourse previously framing refugees positively, while the ZP's rhetoric reinforces exclusion.

The ruling political elite in Türkiye has largely framed Syrian refugees within a narrative of benevolence, portraying state assistance as an act of charity rather than a fulfilment of internationally recognised refugee rights. For instance, the then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in his speech in Gaziantep — one of the most popular destinations for Syrian refugees at the Syrian border — in 2014 publicly stated that the

inhabitants of Gaziantep were from the city of Ansar: "Gaziantep is an Ansar city now. God, bless you all". Similarly, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş used the same discourse in their speeches.

This approach has influenced government policy and shaped attitudes in migration agencies, local municipalities, and civil society, reinforcing a religiously driven perspective. The state's use of the *Ansar* spirit aligns with its broader Islamist and neo-Ottomanist rhetoric, leveraging Türkiye's Islamic heritage to deflect criticism and consolidate support, especially in border regions where refugees are most visible.

Under AKP rule, Türkiye has experienced affective polarisation, a hallmark of right-wing populism that fractures society along ethno-cultural and religious lines. This *co-radicalisation* is fuelled by the state's and opposition's mismanagement — whether deliberate or not — of diversity and intergroup dialogue.

Co-radicalisation of these groups is driven by multiple factors, including worsening socio-economic conditions and competing political narratives on refugee policies. Since 2017, rising tensions in Türkiye have fuelled public discontent toward Syrians, increasing xenophobic and Arabophobic sentiments, particularly during elections. These power dynamics have deepened divisions between native and migrant communities, intensifying mutual radicalisation.

## Co-radicalisation as a new phenomenon in Europe

Co-radicalisation is highly relevant in Europe, where nativist and Islamist youths are caught in a cycle of mutual radicalisation. Both respond defensively to perceived social, economic, and political exclusion. Their radicalisation stems less from cultural or religious differences and more from shared experiences of marginalisation intensified by globalisation and neoliberal policies.

This mutual radicalisation is a reaction to their shared experiences of injustice and exclusion, leading to a cycle of co-radicalisation where each group's radicalisation fuels the other's. Hence, the root causes of radicalisation in both Turkish and European contexts can be found in the socio-economic, spatial, political, and psychological dimensions of exclusion, marginalisation, and identity struggles.

Tensions of this kind, also seen in Germany and other European countries, lead to social and political polarisation. As witnessed in some parliamentary elections, they can also be used as a tool for political campaigning. Similar to the Turkish context, the phenomenon of co-radicalisation in EU Member States is also manifested in the conflicts emerging between nativist and Islamist migrant-origin youths.

## Implications of co-radicalisation for Europe

Germany and Türkiye share strong ties shaped by migration, trade, and EU policy. The *co-radicalisation* of both native and refugee youth in Türkiye is an increasing concern for German policymakers. Since the 2013 Gezi protests, conflict-driven youth migration has continued, fuelling social tensions that prompt both skilled middle-class youth and impoverished local and refugee youth to seek opportunities — often irregularly — in Europe.

If German, European, and Turkish policymakers fail to address these tensions effectively, frustration and distrust may grow, further fuelling extremist narratives and threatening social cohesion. Preventing further conflict-driven migration requires proactive policies and inclusive dialogue. Germany and the EU must not only prepare for potential migratory shifts, but must also tackle the root causes of polarisation to prevent radicalisation and displacement.

To hinder the escalation of conflicts between groups, the EU can support Türkiye through diverse mechanisms and regulations:

- **Work with local municipalities and CSOs:** Enhancing collaboration with local municipalities and CSOs is key to refugee integration. Since the 2016 EU-Türkiye Refugee Statement, local actors have fostered cohabitation. European partners can strengthen engagement through joint economic initiatives and training programmes for refugees and host communities. Support for CSOs should also include advocacy to counter misinformation, highlighting Syrians' contributions and their potential return.
- **Support local communities:** EU Member States can support Turkish communities' vital role in assisting Syrian refugees. Rising social tensions strain both groups, making community-based initiatives crucial. Enhanced EU funding for cultural centres, youth programmes, and sports activities can foster social cohesion, bridge divides, and promote long-term stability.
- **Anti-radicalisation education and integrated schooling:** The Presidency of Migration Management largely frames radicalisation as a security issue. The EU and its Member States can support Türkiye by promoting education programmes that counter extremism and foster tolerance through mixed schooling and intercultural curricula. They can also assist with data collection to improve monitoring and ensure that projects funded by the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey meet the needs of both refugees and host communities.
- **Countering polarising narratives:** EU Member States can support local initiatives in Türkiye that promote nonviolent youth expression — through music, art, and digital activism — as alternatives to radicalisation. They can also work with municipalities to establish mediation committees that address tensions between Turkish citizens and refugees, helping to prevent conflict and extremism.
- **Enhance economic integration and job creation:** EU Member States can collaborate with Türkiye to promote entrepreneurship among Turkish and refugee youth through grants, micro-loans, and mentorship, fostering economic self-sufficiency and easing job competition. The EU Scholarships Project for students under temporary or international protection, as well as Turkish citizens, offers a promising model to build upon.

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