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HUMAN INTEREST STORIES IN THE COVERAGE OF SYRIAN REFUGEES: A CASE STUDY FROM TURKEY

Abstract

This paper investigates the forms of representation of Syrian refugees in *Zaman* newspaper, a Turkish daily that was associated with the Gülen movement, between 2011–2015. The argument focuses on human interest stories in search for alternative forms of representation from the victimization and collectivization that are emphasized in the literature. Based on open coding of 209 news articles that were identified through frame analysis, the analysis shows that the coverage included contradictory strategies of victimization and humanization. The contradictory strategies are understood as a form of inclusive othering that encompass the initial desire to attribute human qualities to the refugees and subsequent attempt to victimize them. As the newspaper was party to a larger political conflict within Turkey, we understand the contradictory strategies and especially the specific shift in representation as part of the process of politicization. The analysis concludes that politicization limits attempts to humanize refugees.



INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement has garnered increasing public attention in recent years, and scholars have observed the mediatization and politicization of refugees in various national contexts around the globe.² Central to such analyses is the process of othering whereby refugees are constructed as fundamentally different from the host population.³ Importantly, othering places groups of people (such as refugees) outside the moral order which marks the boundary between us and them. Observing the labeling of refugees in developed countries, Olsen et al. argue that the process “involves a dialectical relationship between the self-image of developed countries as humanitarian or charitable, and the construction of ‘refugee’ as a vulnerable and burdensome Other.”⁴ Such a construction is observed in the continuous assertion of the refugee status that serves to remind us of their lack of belonging to *Dalia Abdelhady is Associate Professor of Sociology and Researcher at the Centre for Advanced Middle East Studies, Lund University. Email: dalia.abdelhady@soc.lu.se*

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the host society and culture.⁵ Furthermore, the continuous use of the refugee label homogenizes the diversity within displaced populations and negates the possibility of individual narratives and forms of agency.⁶ Research on media portrayals of refugees stresses dehumanizing strategies that are integral to their othering and exclusion.⁷

This article extends the analysis of the mediatization and politicization of refugees by investigating the portrayal of Syrian refugees in Turkish print media. We use the case study of *Zaman* newspaper, formerly one of Turkey's mainstream newspapers, to highlight the politicization of refugees in relation to the larger context of the political role played by newspaper in the period under analysis (2011–2015).⁸ Additionally, the Turkish context extends the understanding of othering beyond the clear distinctions of East vs. West, North vs. South, and/or developed vs. underdeveloped which are popular in refugee studies (and reflected in Olsen et al.'s example above). The traditional understandings of othering stress that the construction of the "other" is dependent on specific understandings of the self and that the relationship between self and other is one that is constructed mostly through difference and often through conflict. As the analysis in this article shows, *Zaman* provides a context where othering is constructed along a more inclusive discourse (self *and* other, as opposed to self *vs.* other). Inclusive othering, we argue, draws attention to the ways othering and its exclusionary mechanisms can take place even when dehumanization is not the strategy pursued. This leads us to emphasize the problematic aspects of the politicization and mediatization of forced displacement regardless of the resort to dehumanizing strategies.

In the next section, we provide an overview of the literature of media representations of Syrian refugees with particular attention to Turkish print media. We then move to explaining our case study, *Zaman* newspaper, by situating it within the larger Turkish context of reception of Syrian refugees, and the role it plays within the Turkish media and political landscapes. The section on methods includes a discussion of framing as an analytical strategy, and the most common media frames found in previous studies. This section also explains our choice to focus the analysis on only one of these common frames—human-interest stories. Following the methods section, we delve into the two main themes we identify within the selection of newspaper articles under investigation. The two themes, victimization and benevolence, represent the kind of inclusive othering that we identify

in our analysis (i.e., *self and other*). These themes provide the basis of the discussion and conclusions at the end of the paper.

THE REPRESENTATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

The Syrian refugee emergency has been described by the UNHCR High Commissioner as “the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time, a continuing cause of suffering for millions which should be garnering a groundswell of support around the world.”⁹ Instead of garnering support as the High Commissioner hoped, the humanitarian crisis has been met with ambivalence towards those forcibly displaced by it. The complicity of the audience at the international stage towards the Syrian crisis in general and the plight of Syrian refugees in specific calls for a cultural analysis of discourses and narratives that may facilitate such complicity. Within cultural analyses, public debates and representations are the ways worldviews are mobilized and deployed in order to “provide cognitive and moral guidance in the interpretation of complex and unfolding crisis situations.”¹⁰ Public critiques and efforts at persuasion are discursive activities that yield legitimacy to political actors, forms of action, and policies. A number of analysts turn to media portrayals as facilitating the complicity towards Syrian refugees and find that contradictory and ambivalent representations may account for confused reactions at the international level.¹¹ Van Dijk argues that mass media are assigned “nearly exclusive control over the symbolic resources needed to manufacture popular consent, especially in the domain of ethnic relations.”¹² With regards to the general construction of refugees and migrants in news media, a number of studies have examined these forms of representation.¹³ Overall, the literature supports the idea that refugees are often represented through negative and dehumanizing rhetoric.¹⁴ Analyses from different contexts stress that security concerns and stories of terrorism dominate coverage of immigration in general¹⁵ and of refugees in specific.¹⁶ In short, mass media seems to manufacture a consent that the reception of refugees has negative consequences on host societies.

The rapidly growing literature on the recent displacement of Syrian refugees, coined by media outlets and policy makers as a “refugee crisis,” also point out the rather negative tone in the news coverage of the refugee crisis. For example, British newspapers suggest the use of the army to prevent refugees from crossing the English Channel,¹⁷ Swedish newspapers stress the threat of radicalization and terrorism,¹⁸ and in various settings, the view that refugees are a burden

on housing, education, and healthcare systems that is straining resources more generally is often observed.¹⁹ The dominant pattern found in most of these analyses is the tendency to stereotype and collectivize refugees, while at times painting them as a security threat.²⁰ Victimized refugees as innocent and needing help and protection is considered part of the tendency to collectivize refugees, even if in seemingly less negative light,²¹ but is also considered to have negative effects such as denying them agency and equal status.²²

With regards to the representation of Syrian refugees in Turkish media, existing analyses confirm the representation of refugees as victims that are also linked to issues of control and illegality.²³ While some argue that Syrians are ignored in Turkish news coverage in general,²⁴ several studies have examined media representations of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Yaylacı and Karakuş and Lazarev and Sharma find that the political standing of the newspapers and their attitudes towards the Turkish government affect the ways they shape the news about Syrian refugees.²⁵ The authors analyze diverse newspapers such as *Hürriyet*, *Yeni Şafak*, and *Cumhuriyet* and find that the kind of coverage is related to the political orientation of the newspaper under analysis. In this analysis, the pro-government *Yeni Şafak* focuses on aid provided by Turkey, *Hürriyet* (the more popular newspaper) focuses on armed conflict, and the opposition *Cumhuriyet* focuses on criticisms against the Turkish government and assigns blame to the government for opening the doors to Syrians. Other studies demonstrate the focus on humanitarian needs including the “economic burden” posed by efforts to meet such needs.²⁶ Onay-Coker investigates three Turkish newspapers that take a different political stance towards the Turkish government and finds that all three criticize the government’s immigrant policy.²⁷ These criticisms, however, take the shape of problematic representations of Syrians as others. With the exception of Onay-Coker’s 2019 study, analyses of Turkish media focus on the general refugee situation—namely, government’s policies and social patterns or problems. The representation of Syrian refugees themselves is overlooked in the process, strengthening the likelihood of denying Syrian refugees their agency in influencing their own representation.

THE TURKISH CONTEXT

Turkey hosts close to four million forcibly displaced Syrians in addition to others from Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Initially, Turkey adopted an open-door policy towards Syrians who fled their homes at the onset of

the civil war in 2011 and welcomed them as “guests.”²⁸ Labelling refugees as guests entailed no legal rights, and it was only in 2014 that a Regulation on Temporary Protection was passed by the Turkish government providing Syrians with access to work permits, social assistance, health and educational services.²⁹ In 2016, an amendment to the citizenship law was introduced offering citizenship to skilled refugees with economic and cultural capital.³⁰ The amendment benefitted only a small number of Syrians in Turkey, and despite the regulation, most Syrians in Turkey live in vulnerable situations unable to access formal employment or permanent residency.³¹ Additionally, the amendment is met with strong criticisms among the Turkish public with reports of racism and discrimination rising steadily.³²

Syrians looking for less precarious living conditions must seek either resettlement through UNHCR or, with the help of smugglers, make their journey to Europe where they can apply for legal asylum. The numbers of refugees arriving in Europe increased steadily following the Arab uprisings and peaked in 2015 triggering a sense of crisis in many European countries. As a result, the European Union negotiated a deal with Turkey whereby migrants would be stopped from reaching Europe in return for funds to help finance hosting refugees in Turkey. Among other details of the deal, Turkey would take back all migrants intercepted in international waters crossing from Turkey to Greece starting 20 March 2016. The EU, in return, would mobilize six billion Euros for refugee projects and related administration costs incurred by Turkey.³³ Intended to function as a management tool controlling the flow of asylum seekers into Europe, the deal also led to tensions between the EU and Turkey as the Turkish government accused the EU in early 2020 of failing to keep their promise to help bear the cost of hosting refugees.³⁴ These tensions peaked as the Turkish president announced that Turkey “opened the doors,” facilitating the movement of refugees from Turkey towards Europe. Despite complaints that characterized Turkey’s tactic as blackmail, the tensions came to an end as the EU presented Turkey with several concessions.³⁵

Using migrants or refugees as negotiation tools is not new in international relations, but is described as “coercive diplomacy.”³⁶ Turkey’s significance as a receiving country of forcibly displaced individuals amounts to more than the country’s ability to weaponize refugees in its negotiations with the EU, however. Historically, Turkey has been an important receiving and transit destination for a number of forcibly displaced groups from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and

Eastern Europe. With regards to Syrian refugees in specific, the reception of refugees is shaped by Turkey's military intervention in Syria which is a leading cause for more recent waves of refugees.³⁷ The contradictory role Turkey plays in the plight of Syrian refugees, as a force in their displacement and also a place of refuge, provides an interesting context for analysis of the experiences of Syrian refugees as well as their representation in various public discourses. Looking into the representation of Syrian refugees in Turkey's public sphere sheds light into the ways Turkey's contradictory role is discerned in Turkish society and the framing of the reception of Syrian refugees.

We focus on the representation of Syrian refugees in one of Turkey's largest newspapers by analyzing articles published between 2011–2015 in the daily *Zaman*. *Zaman's* political stance is an important aspect when analyzing the forms of representation found in the newspaper. *Zaman* can be described as a right-leaning, openly Gülenistic and pro-Islamic; it eventually posed a source of opposition to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that led to its closure in 2016 following the failed coup d'état. The Gülen Movement (GM), founded in the late 1960s under the leadership of Fetullah Gülen, is a religious community that espouses a form of cultural Islam.³⁸ GM and the ruling AKP represent two strands of the Islamic activism in Turkey. Both groups shared a global ambition of universalizing Islam through the gradual, bottom-up Islamization of society, and are believed to have instrumentalized Islam and Islamic symbols for political purposes.³⁹ While it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the relationship between the two movements, existing research points to the gradual divide between the two groups based on their position vis-à-vis the West. While initially allied with the ruling party, GM grew anti-AKP as the two groups became entangled in power struggles, disagreements over policies, and subsequent mutual suspicion.⁴⁰ During the second half of 2013, GM accused AKP elites of corruption and obstruction of justice which resulted in high level arrests that were covered on the pages of the GM newspaper *Zaman* (among others). GM's open support for the corruption investigations was followed by the government accusing GM of orchestrating corruption in December 2013 and declaring the movement a parallel state in 2014.⁴¹ According to political analysts, this transformed the relationship between the two actors from hidden to overt confrontation.⁴² This turning point is observed in the representation of Syrian refugees, as the analysis demonstrates, which reflects that the newspaper has used its coverage of Syrian refugees as a political tool

in its opposition to the government. The conflict between the two groups peaked with the failed coup attempt which took place in July 2016.

METHODS

Zaman was chosen given that the newspaper had the highest circulation in Turkey under the research period. While this rank should be contested based on the institutional support the newspaper received from GM, the newspaper should still be considered as an important source of analyzing media portrayals in Turkish media. The newspaper was taken over by the government on 4 March 2016 and many of its reporters were jailed.⁴³ Since the takeover, all archived news articles became inaccessible. The news articles analyzed here were collected immediately prior to the takeover, and only include articles published until June 2015. Given the inaccessibility of the newspaper archive following the government's takeover, the analysis provided here presents a unique insight into news articles that are otherwise not available. Few studies of Turkish media include an analysis of the discourses presented in *Zaman*. Göker and Keskin provide an analysis of the newspaper coverage of Syrian refugees with the aim of comparing the coverage of Syrian refugees across five different newspapers.⁴⁴ The authors focus on the time period 1 January – 30 July 2015, and therefore offer one snapshot of media discourses. The analysis we present here considers the temporal development of the discourse as we look into articles published between 2011 and June 2015. This time period allows us to account for changes in the representation that are coupled with changes in the relationship between the movement and the Turkish government. A total of 1,159 articles were found using the search function available on the newspaper's website.

The articles were then analyzed using frame analysis. According to Goffman, frames are "schemata of interpretation that provides a context for understanding information and enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label."⁴⁵ Specifically, with regards to media analysis, Entman explains that frames are aspects of a complex reality that are emphasized in texts "in such a way as to promote a particular definition of a problem, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."⁴⁶ In this regard, a text can communicate only one frame, which can also be understood as the specific way journalists choose to affect a story's impact and reception.⁴⁷ A large body of research has

extensively examined framing based on the analysis of a news text.⁴⁸ Research into media frames shows that news coverage relies on a number of identifiable frames to communicate the news to audiences and that different frames can influence readers' or viewers' perceptions of public issues.⁴⁹ Semetko and Valkenburg identify five predominant news frames, which researchers most commonly apply when analyzing media frames: (a) conflict; (b) human interest; (c) economic consequences; (d) morality; and (e) responsibility.⁵⁰ In their description, the authors hold that the conflict frame emphasizes conflicts between institutions, groups, or peoples. Within a given story, the conflict frame also stresses winning and losing (and winners and losers). The human-interest frame, on the other hand, highlights the personal and emotional side of an event, issue, or problem. News stories that employ this frame usually follow a narrative format that explains how a particular issue affects a group of people. By doing so, a human-interest frame personalizes, dramatizes, and emotionalizes the news. The third frame, that of economic consequences, stresses the economic impacts of an event, problem, or issue for a particular group, institution, individual, region, or country. The morality frame adds a religious or moral dimension to an event, problem, or subject, offering a moral message or prescribing specific codes of behavior. Finally, the responsibility frame discusses an issue or problem in such a way that the responsibility for causing or solving the problem lies with a particular government, individual, or group. Stories that adopt this frame motivate assigning blame or praise for an issue or event. These different frames serve to influence readers' or viewers' perceptions of public issues based on the frame activated within a story.

This article focuses on the human-interest frame among the articles collected from *Zaman*. Of the articles archived, 209 were coded under the human-interest frame and form the basis for the analysis provided here. Various authors define human-interest stories as those which provide a "human face" to the issue; employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy, sympathy, or compassion; or emphasize the ways individuals or groups are affected by the issue/problem. While human interest stories can be associated with journalistic techniques used in commercial, tabloid media that focuses on stories of individuals (usually celebrities) in relation to entertainment, sports, and crime, Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud call attention to the importance of this frame in combating negative portrayals of immigrants.⁵¹ Neuman, Just, and Crigler found the human-interest frame to be the second most common

frame across a variety of news content following conflict.⁵² Focusing on refugee representation, d'Haenens and de Lange found the human-interest frame to be the most commonly used in their analysis of refugee coverage in Dutch newspapers.⁵³ While Valkenburg, Semetko, and de Vreese found that such a frame is negatively related to the ability of the audience to recall particular facts or details of a news story, Cho and Gower found that human-interest frames are highly likely to evoke emotional responses from the audience and, in some cases, can provoke audience assignments of blame.⁵⁴ Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud also highlight the human-interest frame used in telling stories about individual migrants, their lives, and their destinations, and argue that the use of such a frame endows the immigrant with agency.⁵⁵

Rather than provide a comprehensive analysis of media representation, this paper investigates the human-interest frame by examining news stories from one newspaper. We focus on the human-interest frame in an attempt to move away from dehumanizing tendencies that are often stressed in research on media coverage of refugees. Articles coded under the human-interest frame were identified as those emphasizing stories of individual migrants and their own voices, or when said articles placed the refugees themselves at the center of the storytelling. It is important to note, however, that the strategy of humanizing refugees features in most of the Turkish news articles, including those which are eventually categorized under a different frame. Importantly, articles that would otherwise be coded as part of the morality frame were found to highly correlate with the human-interest frame as well. Based on an analysis of a large number of national and regional Turkish newspapers, Erdoğan, Kavukçuer, and Çetinkaya conclude that "media almost never refers to the daily lives of Syrians in Turkey and the problems they encounter."⁵⁶ Given that the human-interest frame is the most likely frame in which reference to daily lives of Syrians can be provided, an analysis of news articles utilizing this frame provides insight into the forms of representations that are more humane and supportive.

The article proceeds by describing the different themes found within the human-interest frame within *Zaman's* news articles. These themes were determined by open coding. The first theme we discuss is that of gratitude, benevolence, and heroism (sixty articles). The second theme, in which the majority of the articles fall, is that of victimization, melancholy, and trauma (149 articles). Despite the dominant focus on victimization, which resembles news coverage of refugees elsewhere,

this theme's salient feature is an attempt to forge similarities between the Turkish hosts and the refugees and thus represents a significant departure from other media outlets' attempts to other refugees.⁵⁷ As the following analysis shows, the focus on gratitude and similarities between Syrian refugees and their Turkish hosts was replaced as the representation shifted towards stronger portrayals of victimization that paralleled the intensification of criticisms towards the AKP government in 2014. This shift leads us to conclude that *Zaman's* coverage relied on the use of Syrian refugees as tools in its political power struggle before the newspaper's closure. Importantly, the newspaper's initial emphasis on similarities between Turks and Syrians can be seen as part of the GM's interest in universalizing Islam following a bottom-up approach. The politicization of refugees, however, contradicts that interest, resulting in the newspaper coverage adopting a form of inclusive othering, as our analysis shows.

GRATITUDE, BENEVOLENCE, AND HEROISM

Despite the violence that is integral to the coverage of Syrian refugee trauma (discussed in the next section), *Zaman's* articles, at least initially, adopted a more positive portrayal of happy and grateful refugees. This depiction can be found in all the news articles, especially ones that were published before 2014. The feelings of gratitude to reach safety, receive medical care, and experience family reunification regularly feature in the human-interest stories about Syrian refugees published by *Zaman*. This set of articles brings in an added emphasis on positive experiences with reception and welcome. A number of articles stress the general calmness among refugees, especially within camps, and emphasize banal activities, implying that refugees successfully carry on with their lives. For example, Syrians are portrayed as being able to enjoy smoking hookah in the warm weather,⁵⁸ participate in sporting activities,⁵⁹ watch TV,⁶⁰ enroll in religious courses,⁶¹ organize weddings,⁶² attend cultural events,⁶³ or engage in income generating activities.⁶⁴ This conveyed sense of happiness, though sometimes described as bittersweet,⁶⁵ is unequivocally depicted as a result of Turkish benevolence. As relayed in a 2011 article, "The asylum seekers, who were met with everything from diapers to clothing, said they were happy in the tent city and did not intend to return to their country until the end of the conflict."⁶⁶ The calmness of everyday life in Turkey is often contrasted by the chaos of war in Syria: "The children who used to wake up with sleeping balls and banging sounds in a battle for a year, say 'hello' to the new sun with the sounds of birds for the first

time; they have had joyful minutes."⁶⁷

In addition to the general calmness and happiness the refugees experience, such portrayals emphasize their gratitude towards Turkey for providing a safe haven and the Turkish people who extend a helping hand. For example:

The Syrian family who resides in Payas province of Dörtyol, a province of Dresdil, visited Payas Mayor Bekir Altan to thank him. The Syrian family said that 'Turkey has a big heart. We believe that the Ottoman justice will spread to the whole Middle East thanks to Turkey.'⁶⁸

In this article, depicted refugees appreciate Turkey's benevolence as well as its importance as a role model for other countries in the region. The comparative regional element is further explained: "The Syrians in the tent are satisfied with their lives. They say that we are grateful to Turkey because Turkey was concerned about us more than the Arab countries."⁶⁹

As a sign of appreciation, Syrian refugees increasingly name their children Tayyip and Emine (the name of Erdogan's wife),⁷⁰ and thank Turkey in their prayers.⁷¹ Syrians are portrayed as eternally grateful to their Turkish saviors. For example, Syrians are quoted as saying, "we will be grateful to [Turks] for a lifetime."⁷² In rare occasions, such happiness is shared by their Turkish hosts:

Approximately 3,500 Syrian citizens went out of the tent city to shop with special permission from the officials. Yaylaya tradespeople said that thanks to this the market is active and we are getting rid of the stagnation of the summer months.⁷³

While the main feature of human-interest stories is placing the refugee in the center of the narrative and often narrating experiences from their perspective, a large number of articles, especially those expressing sentiments of content, gratitude, and indebtedness, stress the agency of the Turkish actor instead of the Syrian refugee. For example, a number of stories emphasize that Turkish individuals or organizations provide food, healthcare, security, social activities, education, worship services, banking, and other services.⁷⁴ The Turkish Coast Guard even rescues fleeing refugees from capsized boats.⁷⁵ In

contrast to representations of Syrians receiving service and acts of benevolence in Turkey, those who make it to Europe “live under difficult conditions.”⁷⁶

The positive portrayals of Syrian refugees include forms of behavior that the newspaper describes as heroic and which decidedly forge lines of similarities between Syrians and Turks. In these portrayals, we read about Syrian men as fighters who, after taking their wives and children to safety, return to Syria to fight for their country;⁷⁷ as teachers who continue teaching Syrian children about democracy and freedom;⁷⁸ and as successful business owners.⁷⁹ In one article, there is even coverage of a protest in one of the tent cities where the protestors are quoted as demanding freedom, rights, democracy, order, and justice.⁸⁰ Other articles, for example, show the newspaper’s attempt to bring Turks and Syrians together as members of the same community. One article explains that many Turks have Syrian relatives,⁸¹ and another emphasizes the need for forging familial ties with Syrian refugees.⁸² Many articles describe religious activities, which may appeal to *Zaman’s* readership.⁸³ Three articles emphasize the role children can play in bridging differences between self and other by explaining how children can participate in religious celebrations in Turkish and Arabic,⁸⁴ participate in a singing choir,⁸⁵ or draw pictures together.⁸⁶

VICTIMIZATION, MELANCHOLY, AND TRAUMA

Since the Syrian refugee emergency is a result of violent clashes among different forces, it is hard to dissociate the coverage of the clashes from that of the refugees. As a result, articles that describe the violence in Syria without any reference to refugees were excluded from the analysis. Still, a large majority of articles in this analysis related the origin of the refugee situation to the ongoing violence. In doing so, it is understandable that the representation of refugees as victims is a dominant frame featured in the majority of the studied articles. In this set of articles, repeated references to loss, violence, conflict, and murder of family members dominate.⁸⁷ At the same time, there is a tendency to include some positive undertones to the plight of Syrians when reaching safety in Turkey, as discussed under the first theme. For example, stories of families reunited in Turkey after initial separation during the journey⁸⁸ or refugees receiving much-needed medical care⁸⁹ once in Turkey are used at least initially to construct Turkey as a safe haven. It is important to highlight that despite reaching safety and receiving care and essential provisions, the emphasis is strongly placed

on feelings of grief and melancholy. For example, refugees' voices are heard explaining that "we lost our sense of joy."⁹⁰ These feelings are especially predominant in newspaper articles that narrate religious celebrations and stress Syrians as co-religious guests in Turkey. Emphasizing that Syrians celebrate the same religious occasions such as Ramadan and the Feast of Sacrifice can be seen as a tool to support cultural proximity between Turks and Syrians. This is done, however, while emphasizing the grief that shapes these celebrations among Syrians.⁹¹

References to children suffering,⁹² disease, and the need for help are also drawn upon to complete the sense of desolation and despair.

Every refugee has many painful stories. Some of them have lost their sons, some have lost their fathers, others have lost their sisters and uncles. Children live the greatest trauma. There are deaths in the pictures [drawn by] the Syrian minors who are continuing their education in the camps. The number of psychological problems is not small. So, the guests are given psychological support. The most common problem is post-traumatic behavior disorder and depression.⁹³

The vivid descriptions of refugees' actions, such as the content of children's drawings, are used to strengthen the sense of injustice and trauma. Dramatization of loss is also used to communicate the plight of Syrians in Turkey, as in the example of, "A Syrian father walked between hospitals with his son's lifeless body" in order to obtain a death certificate.⁹⁴ Accentuated references to death, especially in the Mediterranean Sea, contribute to the portrayal of the helpless refugee. Often times, refugees are referred to as mere dead bodies, lacking voice or narrative.⁹⁵ Such incidents are often dramatized as in one example referring to "the most painful return of Syrians"⁹⁶ in reference to a corpse that was found in sea and returned to the family. These deaths were often portrayed as a result of smugglers and illegal activity exploiting Syrians. Similarly, there is a recurrent portrayal of Syrians falling victim to acts of fate or negligence experienced in public works.⁹⁷ Whether it is in reference to services offered to refugees or inadequate infrastructure, the newspaper articles initially did not assign direct credit or blame to specific actors, most likely the

government in these examples.

The initial lack of direct culpability (or credit) was slowly replaced by a clearer assignment of liability and critique of government's action around 2014. In other words, before 2014, blame was assigned in vague and obscure ways. Starting in 2014, with the transformation of the relationship between GM and AKP into overt confrontation, news articles reflect the intensification of criticisms towards the AKP government, which is coupled with assigning direct liability and clear denunciation of government's responsibility towards the plight of Syrian refugees. For example, one article details a police operation designed to capture street beggars around Istiklal street and Taksim neighborhood in Istanbul. Describing the encounter as gut-wrenching, the story clearly highlights the experience of the Syrian street beggars and the negative consequences they encountered.

Police teams gathered dozens of women and children and filled the van. Some women who were begging did not want to go against the police forces. The children that the police tried to take had great fear. Some children cried in fear, while others tried to escape. The children caught in the chase were also put into the municipal police van. Some of the children tried to escape the municipal police by riding on the historic tram. One of the children fell from the tram and was in danger of injury.⁹⁸

In general, the critique of the government's handling of the reception of Syrians in Turkey is taken up in diverse examples. One aspect is the disapproval of the situation in refugee camps established by the Turkish government. Using the voice of one refugee who left a camp, the newspaper shows the reader the unattractiveness of camp life:

All the opposing factions, Shiites, Arabs and even the people of ISIS are always in the camps. We don't want to stay in the same camp with them. If we stay there, they won't make us live. The camp is surrounded by wires. No one knows what's going on inside. Even if they take us back to Syria, we will not enter those camps again.⁹⁹

The author of the article explains that the only other option besides

camp life is to live on the streets in makeshift tents and that “the coming winter scares homeless refugees.”¹⁰⁰ Portraying the harsh conditions of street life is also used to further critique of the Turkish government. In one example, the author explains that many Syrians live in makeshift and precarious dwellings saying that “tens of thousands of Syrians arriving in Ankara took refuge in abandoned squatters and ruins.”¹⁰¹ State actions, according to the author, worsens the refugees’ conditions given that “in the context of urban transformation, these buildings are being demolished by the Metropolitan Municipality of Ankara.”¹⁰² Given that the articles under analysis focus on humanizing the Syrian refugee, the critique of the government expectedly takes place in subtle ways, which become more and more overt starting in 2014.

Coincidentally, as the articles increasingly criticize the government during this time, the helplessness of the Syrian refugees becomes more vivid in the narratives as well. For example, they are described as “waiting for help from philanthropists, and especially the state” as they beg on the streets during the day and avoid freezing at night.¹⁰³ The notion that they are waiting for a helping hand is repeated multiple times,¹⁰⁴ as is their struggle for survival especially in the harsh winter cold.¹⁰⁵ These forms of representation’s cumulative effects are the dramatic victimization and denial of agency of Syrian refugees who are the object of the criticism addressed to the government. Such representation starkly contrasts with the heroism of (some) Syrians and the emphasis on benevolence and gratitude observed in the first theme. This shift coincides with the increasing politicization of refugees as part of the political conflict between the AKP and GM.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article offers an angle into the human-interest frame within coverage of Syrian refugees in one Turkish newspaper, *Zaman*, during the period between 2011–2015. Despite representing the view of a politico-religious movement, news articles within *Zaman* follow similar lines of representation as those found elsewhere in the literature with a predominant focus on victimization, the denial of agency, accentuating difference, and, at times, conflict. Alongside these othering strategies, Syrian refugees are emphatically represented in a humanized fashion which also highlights common religious affinities and actions. We describe these two contradictory strategies as a form of inclusive othering that encompasses attempts by the newspaper to bridge the gap between the Turkish self and Syrian other while simultaneously denying them agency. This contradictory strategy

results from the increasing politicization of refugees which, in the case of *Zaman*, is part of the larger political conflict the newspaper was entangled in. The politicization of refugees refers to the use of refugees in struggles for political power by nation-states (Turkey in face of the EU, for example) and political actors within the nation-state (GM within Turkey). Importantly, as our analysis shows, the politicization of refugees impedes attempts to humanize and include them within the social fabric of the national community.

Our analysis reveals that, similar to dominant forms of representation of refugees elsewhere, articles published in *Zaman* reflected the tendency to victimize Syrian refugees and placed more agency on the actions of the host community. The othering of refugees is dependent on specific understanding of the self, and the opposition between the benevolent self and the vulnerable burdensome other is a well-established strategy in the literature.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, however, there is a tendency in the analyzed articles to portray Syrians as fellow human beings who have agency and share similar traits as their Turkish hosts. Descriptions of mundane daily activities, expressions of gratitude and appreciation, and feelings of sorrow and loss humanize the Syrian refugee and, especially when stressing their co-religious practices, position them closer to their Turkish hosts.

This tendency is a significant departure from the traditional conclusions of othering and victimization highlighted in the literature. In constructing the Turkish self as a benevolent progressive Muslim (which is characteristic of the ways the GM defined its followers), the Syrian refugee other is inevitably included in the attempt to universalize Islam and promote a bottom-up approach to Islamizing society. In this attempt, the Syrian refugee is represented as human and attributed with human qualities (such as capable of joy and suffering). These strategies may be conceived as the opposite of othering as they “discursively construct people as belonging to a common moral community, of acting in ways that are understandable, and as deserving support.”¹⁰⁷ This form of humanizing refugees overlaps with other forms of representation that dehumanize and portray them as helpless victims. As such, understanding the representation of Syrian refugees in *Zaman* cannot follow a simple humanization/dehumanization understanding of the strategies.

Zaman's representation shifted towards the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 whereby the articles criticized and blamed the government for failing to meet the needs of Syrian refugees. The direct critique was coupled with clearer portrayals of helplessness and

vulnerability on behalf of Syrian refugees, and the disappearance of the portrayals of Syrian refugees' gratitude towards the benevolent Turkish hosts. This shift allows us to see that the newspaper used such coverage for political purposes as opposed to pursuing an interest in the human rights of refugees. Similar to the Turkish government's more recent use of Syrian refugees as a tool in its negotiations with the EU, *Zaman* used Syrian refugees to criticize the government and question the governing power dynamics. The failure and eventual shutdown of *Zaman* should thus be seen within the power struggle over politics and not as a result of the newspaper's interest in engaging in issues around the rights of refugees. Importantly, this kind of understanding reflects the newspaper's attempt to weaponize Syrian refugees in its opposition to the Turkish government, which is connected to the government's weaponization of Syrian refugees vis-à-vis the EU. This form of coercive diplomacy or contestation reflects the weak position of both the Turkish government and *Zaman* vis-à-vis the EU and the AKP government respectively. The weaponization of Syrian refugees is part of larger public critiques and efforts at persuasion that take place at the discursive level. In the process, these forms of representation challenge the legitimacy of certain political actors, forms of action, and policies.

Importantly for our analysis, the politicization/weaponization of refugees coincides with a stark shift in representation and a movement away from attempts to humanize Syrian refugees in Turkey. This indicates that politicization and humanization are mutually exclusive strategies which is relevant for the analysis of refugee representation in other contexts. As the Syrian refugee emergency is emphatically understood as heavily politicized and mediatized,¹⁰⁸ our analysis contributes to such an understanding by stressing that this process also entails limiting possible attempts to humanize the refugee themselves. The politicization and dehumanization of refugees, consequently, curtail the potential of the humanitarian emergency to garner the kind of international support that the UNHCR High Commissioner had expected at its onset.

NOTES

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⁸⁴ Yusuf Aydın, “Suriyeli ve Kilisli öğrenciler birlikte Kutlu Doğum programı sundu” [Syrian and Kilis students presented the Holy Birthday program], *Zaman*, 22 April 2013.

⁸⁵ CİHAN, “Suriyelilerden oluşan koro kamplarda konser vermeye hazırlanıyor” [A Chorus of Syrians preparing to perform in camps], *Zaman*, 18 December 2013.

⁸⁶ Zeynep Kılıç, “Barışın resmini Türk ve Suriyeli çocuklar birlikte çizecek” [Turkish and Syrian children will draw a picture of peace together], *Zaman*, 21 December 2014.

⁸⁷ Loss ranges from loss of status, see Seyhmus Edis, “Suriye’de patrondu, Mardin’de ayakkabı boyuyor” [He used to be a boss in Syria, now he dyes shoes in Mardin], *Zaman*, 7 January 2013; to loss of life, see AA, “Suriyeli hamile kadın, yaşam savaşını kaybetti” [Syrian pregnant woman lost her life], *Zaman*, 27 March 2013.

⁸⁸ For example, “Ailesine çadırkentte kavuştu” [He was reunited with his family in the tent city], *Zaman*, 20 January 2013.

⁸⁹ For example, Abdullah Özyurt, “Ölüme bir milim kala hayata tutundu” [He held on to life when he was so sick], *Zaman*, 4 February 2013.

⁹⁰ Fethi Altun, “Bayram ziyaret ettiklerimiz şimdi ya mezarda ya cephede” [The people we visit every feast are now either in the grave or at the front], *Zaman*, 9 August 2013.

⁹¹ See for example, CİHAN, “Suriyeli mülteciler bayramı hüzünlü yaşıyor” [Syrian refugees are sad during the feast], *Zaman*, 15 October 2013.

⁹² For example, CİHAN, “Suriyeli üçüzler süt ve mama bekliyor” [Syrian triplets are waiting for milk and formula], *Zaman*, 12 February 2013; Erhan Çaçan, “Savaşın çocukları balon patlarsa bomba sanıyor” [Children of the war suppose bomb exploded when a balloon explodes], *Zaman*, 3 September 2012; “Suriyeli iki çocuk denizde kayboldu” [Two Syrian children disappeared at sea], *Zaman*, 14 May 2013; and İhlas Haber Ajansı (İHA), “Savaşın masum tanıkları yetimhanede hayatlarını sürdürüyor” [The innocent witnesses of the war continue their lives in the orphanage], *Zaman*, 10 June 2013.

⁹³ “Suriyeli çocuklar, resim dersinde katliamı çiziyor” [Syrian children draw the massacre in painting lesson], *Zaman*, 25 March 2012.

⁹⁴ Demiören Haber Ajansı (DHA), “Suriyeli baba, oğlunun cansız bedeniyle hastane hastane gezdi” [Syrian father walked to hospitals with his son's lifeless body], *Zaman*, 2 July 2014.

⁹⁵ For example, “Mültecilerin otopsileri tamamlandı” [Refugees' autopsy completed], *Zaman*, 10 September 2012.

⁹⁶ Suriyelilerin en acı eve dönüşü” [The most hurtful homecoming of the Syrians], *Zaman*, 13 September 2012.

⁹⁷ For example, “Izgarası çalınan rögardan göle düştü” [A man falls into a lake from the storm drain whose manhole was stolen], *Zaman*, 17 January 2013; CİHAN, “Suriyeli Muhammed sulama kanalında boğuldu” [Syrian Muhammad drowned in the irrigation canal], *Zaman*, 26 June 2013; and İHA, “Suriye'deki iç savaştan kaçtı, İstanbul'da göçük altında kaldı” [A man escaped from the civil war in Syria, gets trapped under debris in Istanbul], *Zaman*, 18 June 2013.

⁹⁸ “Taksim'deki dilenci operasyonunda çocukların hali yürek burktu” [The condition of the children is gut-wrenching in the raid carried out on beggars], *Zaman*, 4 December 2014.

⁹⁹ Selma Tatlı, “Savaştan kaçan Suriyeliler kışı sokakta karşılıyor” [Syrians fleeing from the war meet winter in the street], *Zaman*, 4 November 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Yavuz Akengin and Ünal Livaneli, “Sığındıkları evleri yıkılan Suriyeliler sokakta kaldı” [Syrians whose houses have been demolished, stayed on the

street], *Zaman*, 16 November 2014. It is noteworthy that the newspaper, at least initially, argued that life in camps maybe somewhat more stable for refugees. For example, on 28 July 2013, there is reference to financial insecurities encountered outside of camp life. İlkay Göçmen, "Tek göz odada Suriye'ye dönme umuduyla iftar açıyorlar" [They are opening iftar in a room hoping to return to Syria], *Zaman*.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ünal Livaneli and Yavuz Akengin, "Ankara'da yaşayan Suriyeliler soba bekliyor" [Syrians living in Ankara expect stove], *Zaman*, 6 December 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Selçuk Kapuci, "Ankara'daki perişan Suriyeliler kış günleri için yardım eli bekliyor" [Devastated Syrians in Ankara await help for winter], *Zaman*, 7 December 2014; and İlhan Çulha, "Yağmurda çadır altında kalan Suriyeli aileler yardım bekliyor" [Syrian families waiting for help under tent in the rain], *Zaman*, 23 December 2014.

¹⁰⁵ See also Ayşe Şimşek, "Savaşta kaçtılar, soğuşa tutuldular" [They fled the war, were captured in the cold], *Zaman*, 30 December 2014.

¹⁰⁶ For example, see Olsen et al., "'Other' Troubles."

¹⁰⁷ Steve Kirkwood, "The Humanisation of Refugees: A Discourse Analysis of UK Parliamentary Debates on the European Refugee 'Crisis,'" *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 27, no. 2 (2017): 117, <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2298>.

¹⁰⁸ Krzyzanowski et al., "The Mediatization."