

**THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN SYRIAN  
REFUGEE RESPONSE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN  
TURKEY**

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(MAPP)*

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Name (printed letters): Sema Merve Is.....

Signature: .....

*To the children across the world who had to flee their homes,  
who lost their lives, and who are survivors*

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<sup>1</sup> The original line in Turkish is “Çoktan vardık çocuğum/ Ama üzülme gökyüzü hep senin.”

# ABSTRACT

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*Keywords:* Covid-19 pandemic, Syrian Refugees, Civil Society Organizations, Turkey

Syrian refugees have been some of the most vulnerable people in Turkey, at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, and their economic and living conditions have only worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As the host country of the world's largest refugee population, Turkey faces significant barriers against ensuring the socio-economic well-being of refugees throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. This thesis aims to discover the changing living dynamics of Syrian refugees and how civil society organizations have functioned in the Syrian refugee response throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in Istanbul, Turkey.

Based on a qualitative interview method of semi-structured and in-depth online interviews with relevant civil society experts, this research explores the role of civil society organizations in responding to the escalated vulnerabilities of Syrian refugees during the socio-economic impact of Covid-19. The research findings provide a thorough questioning of the effects and deficiencies of policies through the doubled barriers of public services and deprioritization of Syrian refugees by exploring the possibilities of civil society organizations' roles to bridge the gap during Covid-19. This thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature on migration governance in Turkey by exploring the intersections between the socio-economic impact of Covid-19, the Syrian refugee response, and non-state actors' roles.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Copyright Notice / Author's Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgement .....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures .....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Evolvement of Migration Governance in Turkey .....	4
1.1    New Era for Government of Turkey in Migration Governance: Syrian Refugee Response .....	4
1.1.1    The Arbitrariness of The Public Services .....	5
1.2    Challenges of Urban Refugees.....	7
1.3 The Involvement of the Civil Society Organizations in Migration Governance .....	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	9
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	11
3.1 Online Fieldwork .....	11
3.2 The Scope of the Research Design .....	13
3.2.1    The Scope of Migrant Population: Syrian Refugees.....	13
3.2.2    The Scope of The Civil Society Organizations.....	14
3.2.3    The Spatial Scope of The Research: Istanbul .....	15
3.2.4    The Classification of The Researched Period .....	17
3.3.    Conceptualization .....	18
3.3.1 Syrian Refugees .....	18

3.3.2 Civil Society Organizations .....	18
Chapter 4: Syrian Refugees during Covid-19 Pandemic in Turkey .....	20
4.1 The Nexus of Covid-19 Pandemic and The Border Crisis .....	21
4.1.1 The Role of Civil Society Organizations During the Border Crisis .....	22
4.2 The Impact of Covid-19 on Syrian Refugees in Istanbul .....	24
4.2.1 De-prioritization of Syrian Refugees .....	26
4.2.2 Changing Vulnerabilities: Back to The Basic Needs.....	28
4.2.3 Increasing Limitation to The Access to The Public Services .....	29
4.2.4 Duties' Devolvement to Civil Society Organizations.....	31
4.3 Civil Society Organization's Role and Intervention.....	33
Conclusion .....	36
Appendix 1. The List Of Online Interview Participants .....	38
References.....	39

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Syrians under Temporary Protection in Turkey .....	4
Figure 2. Distribution of Syrians in the scope of Shelter Centers .....	7
Figure 3. Distribution of Syrians based on the top 10 provinces in Turkey .....	16
Figure 4. Location of Istanbul and the border city Edirne .....	23



## INTRODUCTION

*“When no child has to go through humiliation, misery and poverty,  
when no child faces torture, when no child’s identity comes under attack,  
when no child feels abandoned, vulnerable, and alone...  
when no adult mind attempts to hide its evil and cruel acts  
behind facades of religion, governance, patriotism, morality, society or education...  
Only then will we have the chance to imagine a beautiful future for our children,  
till the end of time.”<sup>2</sup>*

When the novel Covid-19 pandemic began, a historic refugee crisis had already been happening in Turkey. This was due to the government of Turkey’s declaration that they would no longer control their border and prevent refugees from crossing into the European Union (EU) under their own volition (Deutsche Welle News 2020). This political decision<sup>3</sup> was announced on the 27th of February 2020 and led to thousands of refugees from cities all over Turkey being trapped at the Greece - Turkey border for weeks. As such on the 11th of March 2020 when the first official Covid-19 case was announced in Turkey, thousands of refugees including vulnerable refugees and children were already trapped in the border towns in Turkey (Üstübcü and Karadağ 2020). This crisis was the starting point of a new era of migration governance in Turkey, as thousands of refugees were left without personal protective equipment (PPE), hygienic conditions compliant with Covid-19 health measures, and proper accommodation.

The conditions of refugees were first ignored and was then followed by their exclusion from specific Covid-19 development, social, and economic aid policies throughout the Covid-19

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<sup>2</sup> Sibel Yerdeniz, “Karabasandan Kurtulmanın Yolu Uyanmaktır” T24, August 28, 2012, <https://sendika.org/2012/08/karabasandan-kurtulmanin-yolu-uyanmaktır-sibel-yerdeniz-t24-71027/>, (date accessed June 6, 2021), “Hiçbir çocuk aşağılanma ve sefalet deneyimlerinden geçmek zorunda kalmadığında, hiçbir işkence görmediğinde, hiçbirinin kişiliğine saldırılmadığında, hiçbir çocuk kendisini terk edilmiş, savunmasız ve yalnız hissetmediğinde; hiçbir yetişkin akıl kendi kötülüklerini ve zalimliklerini din, devlet, vatan sevgisi, ahlak, namus, toplum, eğitim perdesinin arkasına gizlemeye çalışmadığında çocuklarımız için güzel bir gelecek düşleyebilme ihtimalimiz olacak. Sonsuza dek.”

<sup>3</sup> This political decision was announced after 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in Idlib, Syria, and motivated by intimidating European Union by opening the territorial borders, which may cause a similar influx as it happened in 2015, leading to the European “refugee crisis”. This political decision-making of Turkey can be a discussion of separate research which stays out of this research scope.

pandemic in Turkey. As revealed by substantial reports, refugees today have been one of the most vulnerable groups during the Covid-19 (IOM UN Migration 2021), and are disproportionately affected by this socio-economic impact by being at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in Turkey (Relief International 2020; ASAM 2020). It was also revealed that Turkey's policies have been inefficacious in improving the precarious living conditions of refugees, and that the government has deprioritized refugees assistance within the public services and the temporary Covid-19 social and economic aid system (Karadağ and Üstübcü 2021). The pre-existing conditions of refugees in Turkey were not meeting humanitarian standards, and this was worsened by barriers to accessing public services, child labor, stigmatization, and an increasing level of poverty, with many refugees living in extreme poverty. In this reality, as revealed by this research, civil society organizations increased their efforts and service delivery under the unprecedented conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic and functioned as a hub not only for the dissemination of reliable information about Covid-19 measures, but also to increase refugee access to public services. Another notable finding of this research is that the ever-increasing devolvement of state responsibilities to civil society organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, civil society organizations have fulfilled a prominent role due to existing policies limitations and the inability of public authorities to respond to the precarious conditions of refugees.

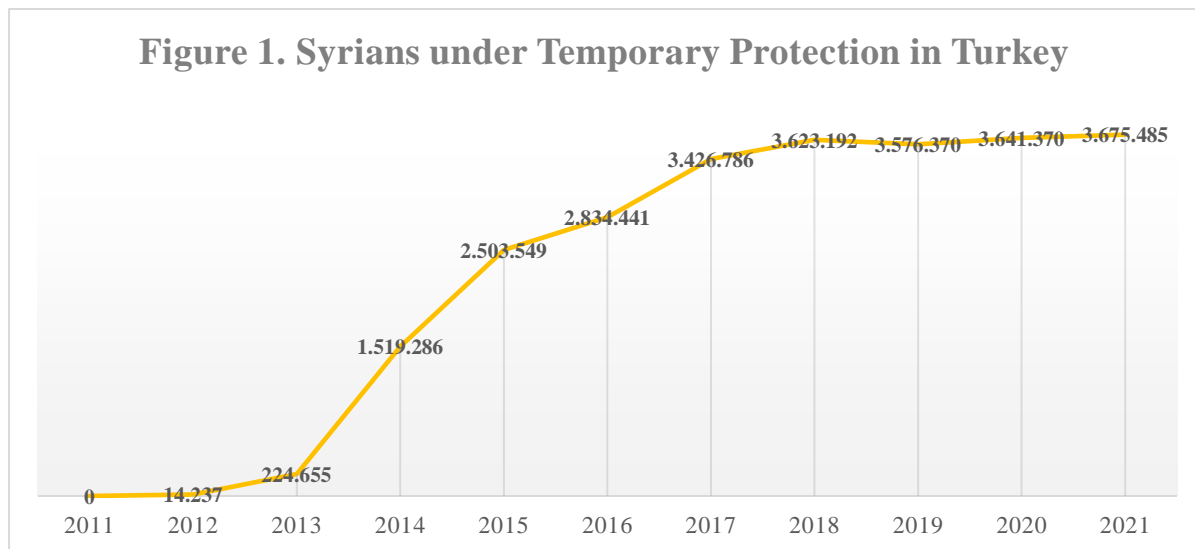
Considering that Turkey has the world's largest refugee population, this thesis investigates the socio-economic impact of the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic on Syrian refugees' vulnerabilities and revisits the efficacy of policies for refugees who reside in Istanbul, Turkey. As a whole Turkey has been a safe country by hosting 3.6 Syrian refugees, while Istanbul hosts the largest population as 525.905 registered Syrians, making up 3.5% of the city population (DGMM 2021). This research concentrates on the Syrian population in Istanbul, including undocumented Syrian refugees, in order to track the research questions on how civil society

organizations function in the migration governance for Syrian refugee response throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative interview-based research was a conducive tool to investigate their role in the time of the Covid-19 crisis due to the gap in the literature as detailed under the literature review and methodology sections. This thesis aims to broaden the current knowledge on the vulnerabilities of Syrian refugees escalated by Covid-19 and demystify the policies' inadequacies in responding to their existing challenges while also exploring the role of civil society organizations. This up-to-date research contributes to the literature by filling a gap on migration governance by investigating the intersections between the socio-economic impact of Covid-19, the Syrian refugee response, and non-state actors' roles in Turkey.

# CHAPTER 1: EVOLVEMENT OF MIGRATION GOVERNANCE IN TURKEY

## 1.1 New Era for Government of Turkey in Migration Governance: Syrian Refugee Response<sup>4</sup>

Since 2011, Turkey has gradually become the safe haven for the world's largest refugee population by implementing an open-door policy for those fleeing the on-going conflict in neighboring Syria (DGMM 2021). Based on DGMM under Ministry of Interior's official records, there are 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees as of June 2021, which constitutes 4.7% of Turkey's overall population (See Figure 1. Syrians under Temporary Protection). The large number of refugees with social, economic, and humanitarian needs has caused significant challenges for Turkey, which already had a precarious socio-economic situation as a developing country (Del Carpio and Wagner 2015).



*Figure 1. Syrians under Temporary Protection in Turkey  
(as of 2.6.2021) Source: DGMM*

<sup>4</sup> This chapter has been excerpted and adapted from the final policy brief titled "Syrian Refugees' Equal Access to Social Services in Turkey" which was written by the student for the Policy Analysis Course in Fall 2020 semester at CEU.

Initially the Government of Turkey attempted to mobilize resources using humanitarian aid from the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency Agency (AFAD), but due to the protracted nature of the crisis, the Government of Turkey reformed the policies on migration governance. Accordingly, the rights of Syrian refugees were ensured by the founding of the Directorate General Migration Management (DGMM) under the Ministry of Interior in 2014 and by enacting relevant legislation (Temporary Protection Regulation under The Law on Foreigners and International Protection in 2014) and other regulations (Regulation on Work Permit in 2016). Furthermore, by mobilizing relevant Ministries (Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services), the government was able to accommodate the increasing influx of refugees over the years and to increase their access to public services in education, healthcare, and social services. Nevertheless, there were still clear gaps in terms of policy implementation even before the Covid-19 outbreak: 64% of urban Syrian households live below the poverty line, including 18.4% of Syrian households remain below the extreme poverty line (“3RP Turkey Chapter: Outcome Monitoring Report” 2018); only 1.5% of Syrians have an official work permit (Demirguc-Kunt, Lokshin, and Ravallion 2019) and hence there is high participation in the informal economy, including a high proportion of child labor (Del Carpio and Wagner 2015); 40% of children remain out of school (UNICEF and MoNE 2019).

### **1.1.1 The Arbitrariness of The Public Services**

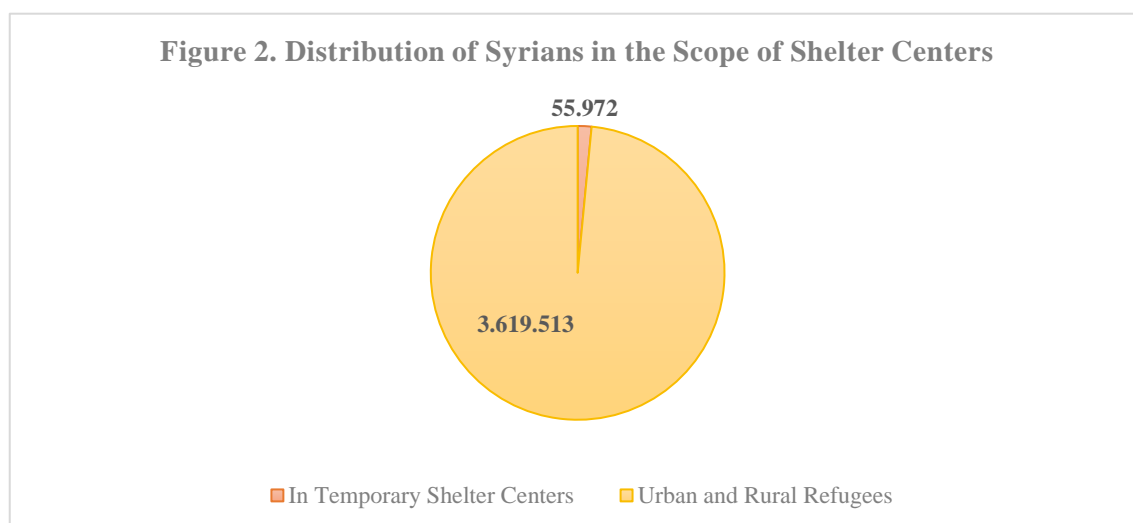
Syrian refugees were treated as “guests”, predicated on the assumption that their presence at the beginning of the Syrian crisis would be temporary in Turkey (EMHRN 2011, 9). This political discourse was persistent despite the protracted nature of displacement and the crisis forcing the Government of Turkey to enact relevant laws and official frameworks and establish

relevant units and mobilize the Ministries to respond to the crisis effectively. However, ambiguity towards how to implement refugee policies and the perception of refugees as “guests” fostered a negative public perception towards refugees (Altiok and Tosun 2018; Sunata and Tosun 2018) and deterred their social and economic integration in the long run. In addition, this perception of “temporariness” has contributed to arbitrary or limited-service provisions by state service providers in the urban context. As (JICA 2019)’s findings discuss, the underlying causes for the insufficient public services provided towards Syrian refugees not only stem from inadequate resources, but also from several interrelated factors:

- o lack of infrastructural, logistical, financial, and human capacity to extend the services to refugee population,
- o misinformation or incomplete information about the laws and regulations on refugees’ rights and obligations to access these services,
- o implicit or explicit discrimination towards refugees and public disfavor,
- o inadequate professional expertise to respond to urban refugees’ complex problems,
- o language barrier, inadequate human resources for translator/interpreter or insufficient numbers of Arabic speaking staff,
- o lacking website presence or relevant information in Arabic targeting Syrian refugees,
- o Syrian refugees’ inadequate information about the role of public services and their physical location in the city.

## 1.2 Challenges of Urban Refugees

While only 1.5% of Syrians live in Temporary Shelter Centers (also known as temporary accommodation centers), a proportionally high number of refugees (3.6 million) in Turkey live in urban and rural areas (see Figure 3. Distribution of Syrians in the Scope of Shelter Centers).



*Figure 2. Distribution of Syrians in the scope of Shelter Centers (as of 2.6.2021). Source: DGMM*

Urban settings pose various structural challenges in terms of accessing basic rights, such as the inability to benefit from public services due to legal, bureaucratic, and language barriers (Cloeters et al. 2018; GIZ 2021). Since state mechanisms in urban areas have certain technical and resource limitations in providing support and guidance for refugees on their legal rights in Turkey, gaps in service delivery continue to be a significant problem (Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies 2016; GIZ 2021). As well, the legal framework's misconception of urban refugees' actual reality (Sunata and Tosun 2018) pushes refugees into a state of limbo in terms of accessing public services. Even though Syrian refugees were guaranteed access to their basic rights on health, education, social services by the Temporary Protection Regulation (2014), and allowed to participate in formal economic life after the regulation of Work Permits in 2016, poverty, low schooling rates, unemployment or employment in the informal economy, child

labor, early marriages, discrimination and xenophobia continue to a reality for many refugees (İçduygu and Millet 2016; İçduygu and Diker 2017; “3RP Turkey Chapter: Outcome Monitoring Report” 2018).

### **1.3 The Involvement of the Civil Society Organizations in Migration Governance**

The adaptation of civil society organizations to the Syrian refugee response is noticeable since the mass refugee influx resulted in changes to the landscape and activities of civil society organizations countrywide, creating new mandates in the areas of service delivery and advocacy (GIZ 2021). The drastic increase in the number of NGOs after the 2011 era, existing civil society actors adapting their activities in response to the needs of refugees, and newly emerged NGO run community centers across Turkey are among the main evidence of civil society’s responses (Sunata and Tosun 2018, 686). Civil society’s timely and legitimate intervention alleviated the burden on state mechanisms and allowed new cooperation mechanisms between the public and civil society (GIZ 2021), playing a crucial role not only in filling the gap in service delivery, but also in facilitating refugees’ access to the relevant public services by referrals. Therefore, civil society has had a positive impact on the gradual integration of refugees within Turkey (Sunata and Tosun 2018; GIZ 2021).



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Turkey has been the source for a rich academic literature on migration, stemming from its geographical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and from its profound position as the country of origin, transit, and destination country for various migratory movements in its history (İçduygu and Millet 2016). By the turning point in 2011, Turkey had become the home for the world's largest refugee population as a result of an open border policy motivated by humanitarian concerns for the citizens of its neighboring country of Syria (Özden 2013; İçduygu and Diker 2017; Collier and Betts 2017; Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies 2016). Hence, the last decade has witnessed profound developments in migration governance in Turkey due to the protracted nature of the Syrian refugee crisis (İçduygu and Diker 2017). Parallel to the policy developments within the last decade, there has been growing academic and grey literature including working papers and reports which discuss the state's progressive migration governance policies and its impacts upon the living conditions of Syrian refugees. The first wave of studies (Dinçer et al. 2013; Özden 2013) emerges after the mass influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey and elaborates on the humanitarian assistance being given and Syrian refugees' immediate living conditions after the eruption of war in Syria in 2011. Because of the protracted nature of the Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey's migration reforms and comprehensive integration strategies were discussed most likely after 2013 (Kirişci 2014; Kirişci and Ferris 2015; İçduygu and Millet 2016; Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies 2016). Another literature group discusses the ambiguous state of migration policies and this ambiguity can create a state of limbo for Syrian refugees in Turkey (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017; Memisoglu and Ilgit 2017; Altıok and Tosun 2018).

Despite the growing literature that assesses migration policy reforms and their impacts on Syrians' precarious conditions within Turkey, there is limited research about other institutions

and non-state actors' roles in migration governance. Recently emerging literature focusing on different aspects of non-state actors involved in mostly social integration processes include: comparative analysis of civil society initiatives in Germany, Italy and Turkey (Feyzi Baban et al. 2018), historical analysis of state run community centers' and civil society's role in protection of refugees with implementing community-based approach through community centers (Biehl 2019); I/NGOs role in social inclusion (Sunata and Tosun 2018; Paker 2019; Aras and Duman 2019; Seyidov 2021); refugee community organizations' role (Sahin Mencutek 2020); the agency of faith-based NGOs (Turhan and Bahçecik 2021). Although these organizations have different functions, based on mission, vision, and type of organization, the main common agreement of this group of literature is that all civil society organizations, regardless of mandate, have had a positive impact on the integration of Syrian refugees, and to some extent, have filled the gap left by the lack of organizational capacity and resources of state actors and the bureaucratic limitations of existing policies. This consensus in the literature is further demystified by Sunata and Tosun (2018) as the "governmental inadequacy and incapacity of Turkey, suddenly thrust into being the biggest refugee-hosting country of the world, induced the reactivation of its civil society" (699).

Based on this literature, this study aims to discover the novel role of civil society organizations within the changing dynamics in migration governance throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The negative socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on Syrian refugees was elaborated by recently emerging literature (Budak and Bostan 2020; Relief International 2020; ASAM 2020; Üstübici and Karadağ 2020; Karadağ and Üstübici 2021). Hence, this timely research will contribute to the literature by assessing the intersection between migration governance and civil society organization's engagement in the refugee response within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As discussed in the literature review section, the apparent gap in the academic literature regarding the role of civil society organizations and the analysis of the refugees' changing circumstances due to Covid-19 on their living conditions is the impetus for this timely research. Therefore, this research utilizes secondary data mainly from the emerging grey literature, including reports produced by NGO and INGO actors on rapid assessment of the conditions of refugees escalated by the impact of the Covid-19, and national and international news on investigating refugees existing conditions as well as relevant legal documents.

In addition to the secondary data, this research incorporates an interview-based qualitative research method as this research is most likely to utilize the primary qualitative data gathered through interviews via online fieldwork. The primary qualitative data was collected through twelve semi-structured and in-depth online interviews conducted with civil society experts from seven civil society organizations from Istanbul, Turkey. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown conditions throughout the research period, online fieldwork has been conducted stemming from the unfeasibility of in-person and face-to-face interaction.

### 3.1 Online Fieldwork

This research incorporates the qualitative interview-based methodology (Brinkmann 2016), benefitting from expert interview techniques (Berner-Rodoreda et al. 2020) by complementing the existing grey literature (ASAM 2020; Relief International 2020; IOM UN Migration 2021). The interview findings are limited to the scope of the below described civil society organizations based in Istanbul which actively taking part in refugee response, particularly supporting Syrian refugees.

The research also incorporates the snowball sampling method to reach out to the relevant experts in the field. A total of thirteen organizations have been invited to take place in this research by e-mail invitation. Out of thirteen organizations, seven organizations agreed to share their insight and experiences in the migration field and their challenges and confrontations with the public authorities. A total of twelve interviews with civil society experts were conducted from seven different civil society organizations to investigate the function of civil society organizations during Covid-19. The interviewees are deliberately selected from among field workers, social workers, psychologists, and program managers from relevant organizations to gain diverse perspectives and capture the impact of the Covid-19 from different points of view among the chosen organizations.

Out of twelve interviewees, seven interviewees take roles directly in the field, while five fulfill program responsibilities mostly based in headquarters in Istanbul. After an official meeting request all interviews were conducted on online platforms and took approximately two hours and a half with the relevant experts. All interviews were held in Turkish and transcribed exclusively and coded manually based on the recurrent subjects. The relevant quotes were translated into English afterward and original words provided as the footnote.

Due to the topic's sensitivity - civil society organizations' critical point of view on public services and policies - all organizations and individuals are kept anonymous based on mutual agreement. Considering political sensitivity and the existing pressure upon civil society organizations in Turkey in the last decade due to the escalating authoritarianism and shrinking democratic civic space (Sunata and Tosun 2018), this research sensitively incorporates the do-no-harm approach (Knott 2019) by anonymizing the actors and representatives and not mapping out the organizations intently and explicitly. Therefore, the principles of anonymity and confidentiality are fully respected. All participants were well-informed about the data

collection process in advance, and explicit oral consent of the participants was received before the data collection.

### **3.2 The Scope of the Research Design**

As part of the research design in line with the methodology, the scope of the research within the migrant population, the organization, and the city, the description of the researched time period, and the conceptualization has been separately discussed under the relevant sections:

#### **3.2.1 The Scope of Migrant Population: Syrian Refugees**

Although Turkey hosts diverse migrant populations from Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan among other countries, Syrians represent the majority with a registered population of 3.6 million, with the non-Syrian registered population only being around 330,000 (DGMM 2021). In addition to registered migrant populations, more than 1 million irregular migrants are residing in Turkey (Özkul 2020, 6). Although Turkey hosts roughly 5 million migrants from different nationalities regardless of their legal status, the scope of this research is limited to Syrian refugees, including those under Temporary Protection Regulation and the undocumented, and their corresponding status quo during Covid-19.

This limitation stems from separate legal frameworks that different nationalities are subjected to, resulting in substantial differences regarding the access to rights and freedom of movement in Turkey. Non-Syrian populations are subjected to the Law on Foreigners And International Protection (LFIP); hence, they must reside in pre-determined satellite cities. On the other hand, Syrian refugees subjected to Temporary Protection Regulation are temporarily under protection by law indefinitely and are free to choose the city of their residence (with some exceptions including İstanbul since 2018). Considering the apparent differences in legal duties and responsibilities of different nationalities on the ground, the scope of this research is only limited

to Syrian refugees and the assessment of their status quo corresponding to the Temporary Protection Regulation.

### **3.2.2 The Scope of The Civil Society Organizations**

Over the course of years, the increasing number of Syrian newcomers to Turkey resulted in the mushrooming of civil society organizations and/or the transformation of their pre-existing activities based on the emerging societal needs across Turkey (Sunata and Tosun 2018; Feyzi Baban et al. 2018). Therefore, a wide range of civil society organizations have adapted to this new challenge and committed to improving access to public services for refugees and easing the tension between refugee communities and local communities all over Turkey (Biehl 2019; GIZ 2021). In Istanbul, approximately 80 different civil society organizations with various typologies dedicated their work to the refugee response in districts where refugee populations reside in large numbers. In such a dynamic and prosperous civil society organizational habitat, the scope of this research is only limited to investigate the role of organizations that directly engaged with public actors. Regarding the determination of organization, the significant commonalities based on these selection criteria are:

- o Type of the civil society organization: non-governmental organization (NGO)
- o Operation period: Permanently operate in Istanbul at least for 5+ years
- o Size of the organization: Medium-sized NGOs had expertise in refugee response
- o Engagement with the state actors: Closely work with the government and state actors for the collaboration

- o The scope of activities: Protection, social counseling, psychological counseling, legal counseling, community-based group activities, referral to state services, translation, accompaniment

Apart from the Covid-19 related response, the organization's status required vast prior engagement in the refugee response field. This scope of organization excludes those who activated only during Covid-19. Accordingly, they were selected from among the organizations taking an active role during the Covid-19 pandemic for the Syrian refugee response. Therefore, their assessment of the changing circumstances and comparing the pre and post-covid situation analytically benefited this research. Therefore, the selected civil society organizations support the comparative assessment of the function of civil society organizations. Additionally, it is crucial to note that the representation of civil society organizations is limited to this scope, rigidly excluding grassroots organizations, religious-based organizations, government-organized non-governmental organizations, and refugee-led organizations typologies.

### **3.2.3 The Spatial Scope of The Research: Istanbul**

As the largest city of Turkey, Istanbul draws the attention of refugees for the wide-range of job opportunities in the informal labor market, although urban dynamics create fragile conditions for accessing services and accommodation compared to the rural areas (Del Carpio and Wagner 2015; Uysal and Volkan 2020; Kolaşın, Genç, and Kavuncu 2019; Uysal, Uncu, and Akgül 2018). The other pull factors of Istanbul are initial social networks, better education, and hospital systems in general, which indicates better life opportunities. The Covid-19 pandemic has different implications for refugees living in Istanbul; therefore, this research limits its focus on city dynamics, whereas urban refugees have different challenges than encampment conditions.

This research has also limited its spatial scope to civil society organizations operating in Istanbul for the urban refugee response and to the living conditions of Syrian refugees residing in Istanbul. This limitation is based on Istanbul hosting the largest migrant population in Turkey with 525,905 registered Syrians (DGMM 2021). Istanbul has the largest number of Syrian refugees under temporary protection accounting for roughly 3.5% of the city's population (See Figure 3. Distribution of Syrians based on the Top 10 Provinces in Turkey). The highest proportion of Syrian refugees reside in Istanbul, which has different implications for accessing public services than the refugees residing in rural areas and sheltered refugees.

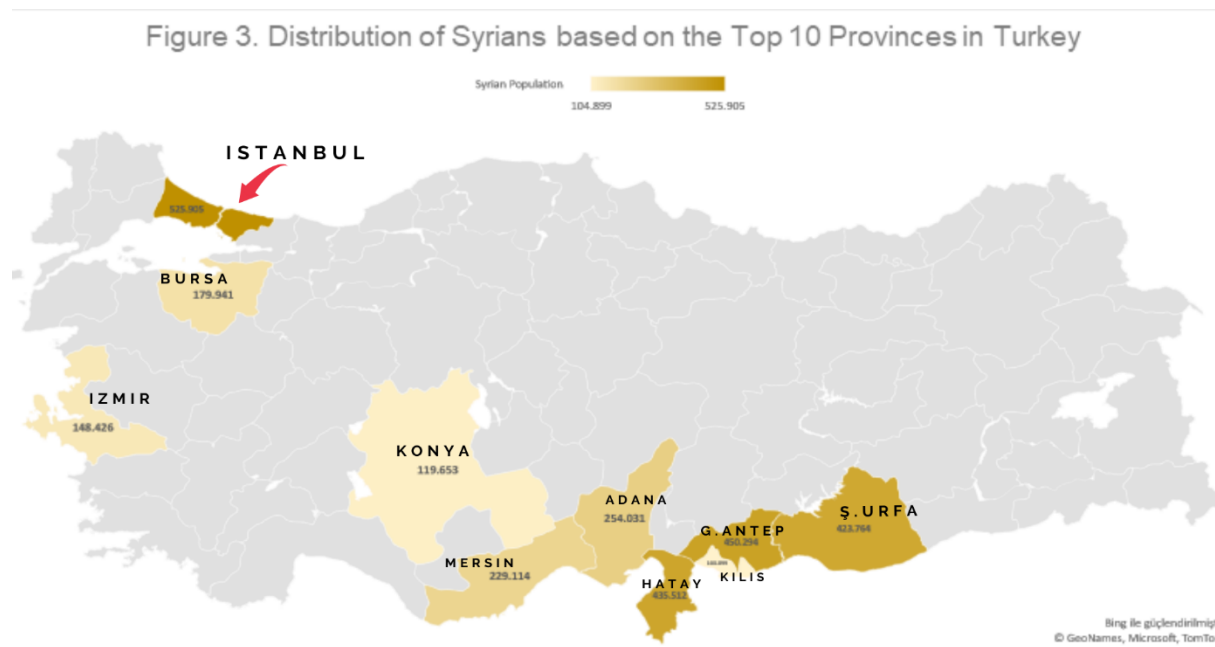


Figure 3. Distribution of Syrians based on the top 10 provinces in Turkey (as of 2.6.2020). Source: DGMM

Furthermore, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) has suspended the registration for Syrian refugees in Istanbul since 2018, and as such have been no longer able to access their rights in the city. This forced many refugees to stay undocumented in Istanbul or continuing to stay in Istanbul with a different city of registration. Either way they were still not able to access to their rights under the Temporary Protection Regulation. Therefore, this policy



has led many Syrians to stay out of the registration system and left them unable benefit from their existing legal rights. Notably, this closed registration established a barrier between refugees and public authorities, within which civil society organizations were pushed to take a proactive role to support undocumented refugees or refugees registered in the different provinces who stayed in Istanbul due to the city's existing opportunities.

### **3.2.4 The Classification of The Researched Period**

In Turkey, the first Covid-19 case was announced on the 11th of March 2020, followed by the Greece - Turkey border crisis as Turkey opened its borders for the refugee flow towards the EU territories on the 27th of February 2020. This historical incident will be the starting point of this research, indicating the intersectionality of Covid-19 and refugee response, as thousands of refugees were stuck at the border at the beginning of a global pandemic. Therefore, this research focuses on the period between the 27th of February 2020 and the 30th of April 2021. This long period is classified into three phases based on the Covid-19 measures in Turkey. The phases were explicitly discussed with every interview participant to determine a specific and relevant timeline for the impact of Covid-19 measures on Syrian refugees. The below indicated phases have had different impacts on the existing circumstances of refugees in line with the changing Covid-19 measures in Turkey. Throughout the thesis, these categories will imply the below periods, which were discussed and agreed upon by the interviewees:

- The first phase will indicate between February 2020 – June 2020,
- The new normalization phase will indicate July 2020 – September 2020,
- The second phase will indicate October 2020 – April 2021.

### **3.3. Conceptualization**

#### **3.3.1 Syrian Refugees**

As part of tackling the humanitarian crisis, Turkey enforced a Temporary Protection Regulation (2014) to ensure the rights of Syrians in accessing public services in education, health, and social services (DGMM 2020). The mass influx of Syrians into Turkey and the inability to individually assess the refugee status of each claimant caused the invocation of such regulations in the first place. Therefore, Syrians are categorically neither refugees nor asylum seekers; rather, their legal status is deemed as “Syrians under temporary protection” according to Turkish law.

In this thesis, the term “Syrian refugees” will be consistently used as a descriptive category regardless of their legal status in Turkey, noting that they are not granted legal refugee status due to the limitations of the law. Secondly, the term “Syrian refugees” will be used to cover legal status granted by Turkish authorities including “Syrians under temporary protection”, undocumented Syrians, and registered Syrians who cannot benefit from their right due to residing in a different city than where they are registered. This descriptive and inclusive category is chosen to imply that Syrians are de facto refugees based on the reality that they had to leave their country, fleeing the war and conflict zones based on the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR 2011).

#### **3.3.2 Civil Society Organizations**

In Turkey, civil society organizations cover a wide range of typology of organizations (Sunata and Tosun 2018), including religious-based organizations, semi-governmental organizations, government-organized non-governmental organizations, International NGOs, grass-root organizations, etc. Based on the prosperous typology of civil society organizations and the growing number of civil society organizations in the migration field, the research goes further

to suggest a new typology as part of the conceptualization of the organizations, which is NGO-R, in which R indicates refugee support (Sunata and Tosun 2018). Although the researched civil society organizations can be easily posited into this invented category, this research will use civil society organizations on purpose as a generic category as the NGO-R conceptualization is unique to that particular research.

The researched civil society organizations are associations and foundations falling under the legal structural framework of the NGO landscape in Turkey. Therefore, as a descriptive category, civil society organizations will precisely imply the NGO as the scope of organizations extensively described under 3.2.2 The Scope of The Civil Society Organizations. Thus, this thesis will use civil society organizations by excluding those other typologies and will only concentrate on the civil society organizations working for refugee support as the sample group noting that religious-based organizations, government-organized non-governmental organizations, and grass-roots organizations might have different interventions in the field than the researched organizations.

## **CHAPTER 4: SYRIAN REFUGEES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN TURKEY**

Since the outbreak was officially declared in Turkey on 11 March 2020, the government has gradually introduced measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19. These measures include the closure of borders, flight bans, school closures, suggestion for self-isolation, restrictions on movement, and weekend curfews followed by full weekday curfew for age groups outside the labor force such as those below 20 and above 60 (DW News 2021). Turkey also put into force social protection yield programs to protect the rights of the workforce and alleviate the burden on businesses in order to minimize the fallout of the pandemic on the labor market (AA News 2021).

Despite the efforts of the government to minimize the spread and impact of Covid-19, Turkey ranked five globally, with 5,348,249 total cases and 48,950 deaths as of the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2021 (Worldometer 2021). While these official statistics also include the refugee population as declared by the officials, there is no available disaggregated official data disclosing the rate of infected refugees in Turkey. Therefore, it is unlikely that the health impact on Syrian refugees can be reasonably estimated (Özvarış et al. 2020; Cumhuriyet News 2021).

However, starting from the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, the immediate socio-economic effect was observable among Syrian households in Istanbul as rapid assessment reports reveal that 87% of Syrian households lost their jobs, 81% of households were unable to meet their basic needs, and lastly 71% of the surveyed Syrians declared that they are unable to access public health services (Relief International 2020, 7). Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic has been aggravating existing hardships in Turkey. Refugees have an enhanced need for protection, not only in regard to access to basic health care, but also in socio-economic

supports due to the impact of Covid-19. According to the Advancing Migration Governance (ADMIGOV) report (Üstübici and Karadağ 2020),

“Displaced communities have been disproportionately affected due to their existing health conditions and living standards characterized by overcrowded households.... with limited access to hygiene, mostly stemming from their lower socio-economic standing in the society.” (6)

Based on this context, the interview results indicate that there has been an apparent increasing trend of de-prioritization and neglect of Syrian refugees in policies and public services, starting with the border crisis at the beginning of the pandemic. Therefore, this section and the following sections will analytically discuss the interviews conducted with the civil society organizations by benefitting and situating those interview findings into the current grey literature to depict the impact of Covid-19 on Syrian refugees and the gaps in the system that civil society organizations attempted to cover in response to emerging needs.

#### **4.1 The Nexus of Covid-19 Pandemic and The Border Crisis**

When the novel Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, Turkey and EU have been witnessing a historic refugee border crisis after 2015 European refugee crisis (See also Collier and Betts 2017). On 27th of February 2020, the government of Turkey declared that they were not able to hold refugees at the border of Turkey who wanted to cross into European territory. Thousands of migrants ended up heading to the border with Greece in the northwest of Turkey (Deutsche Welle News 2020). On 11th of March 2020, when the first Covid-19 case was announced in Turkey, thousands of refugees were already trapped in the border town called Edirne at the border of Greece and Turkey as Turkey was not imposing the control of its borders any more in line with this declaration. This combination of crisis was described by scholars in Turkey as the “Edirne-COVID nexus, a combination of border and public health crises” (Üstübici and Karadağ 2020, 31). Due to inadequate hygiene conditions and medical care and

the lack of testing facilities, there was a high risk of spread of Covid-19 among migrants, but no positive case was detected or declared (Üstübeci and Karadağ 2020, 17).

After the first official Covid-19 case was revealed on 11 March 2020 in Turkey, the strict lockdown measures were immediately announced. Hence, the return of refugees from the border coincides with the announcement of Covid-19 lockdown measures, leading to a chaos in terms of thousands of people heading back to their proper accommodation in compliance with the Covid-19 regulations. This post-evacuation period was far from a planned and orderly return, but was instead very chaotic (Özkul 2020; Relief International 2020). While the Greek border remained closed and Covid-19 cases increased in Turkey, the government started to evacuate the border (Üstübeci and Karadağ 2020, 17). The migrants were left in the bus terminal in Istanbul without proper accommodation facilities or state organized quarantine restrictions in the midst of the rise of Covid-19 (Bianet 2020).

On 26th of March the full evacuation of the border was implemented, and refugees were transported to temporary accommodation where they were to quarantine for 14 days under state control. No positive cases were detected; however, the conditions were criticized for being overcrowded with small spaces. As well, contrary to official statements, it has been speculated that 30 positive cases were detected in those centers (Üstübeci and Karadağ 2020, 20).

#### **4.1.1 The Role of Civil Society Organizations During the Border Crisis**

This border crisis has had a huge impact on the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic as 13,000 migrants gathered on the border (IOM 2020) and many Istanbul based civil society organizations sent their staff to the border city to ensure humanitarian assistance and monitor incidents of human rights violations. All of the interviewed civil society organizations took active roles in this crisis because of the close location of this border city (See Figure 4. Location of Istanbul and the border city Edirne) and declared that this doubled the challenge for their

work, as all their staff, activities, resources were already mobilized for this humanitarian crisis at the beginning of the pandemic.



At the time of the Covid-19 lockdown, the random transfer of people caused several vulnerabilities in the post-border crisis period (Üstübcü and Karadağ 2020, 20) as state actors left migrants on the street after being released from the quarantine removal center without temporary housing facilities or proper accommodation (Bianet 2020). The researched civil society organizations' first intervened to cover accommodation, bus tickets, cash assistance, as well as the distribution of hygiene materials and relevant PPE. The interviewed civil society organizations highlighted the further operational challenges arising the lockdown measures announced at the beginning of the pandemic in Turkey. Therefore, engagement of civil society organizations was restricted after the post-evacuation period due to the quarantine conditions and the rise of Covid-19 in Turkey, followed by the official lockdown measure in which civil society organizations could not properly function in the field, which is also supported by another research:

“According to the testimonies of lawyers and health specialists that we interviewed, the efforts of civil society aiming to closely follow the situation of people during the

quarantine period had failed due to the lack of access and communication.” (Üstübici and Karadağ 2020, 19)

The first phase begun with the aforementioned intervention of civil society organizations to alleviate the impact of the border crisis on refugees and ended with the state-controlled post-evacuation period. However, during the ongoing first phase of Covid-19, this crisis caused a longer-term impact in terms of adaptation of their work to the emerging needs of refugees posed by Covid-19 circumstances while recovering from this humanitarian crisis. This was agreed upon by all interviewees.

#### **4.2 The Impact of Covid-19 on Syrian Refugees in Istanbul**

As Turkey’s most populated city, Istanbul lies at the heart of the Turkish economy, with a population of over 15.5 million (Daily Sabah News 2021) and over half a million registered Syrian refugees. Istanbul hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees countrywide, with 525,905 registered Syrians under Temporary Protection, making up around 3.5% of the population of city (DGMM 2021). In addition to registered Syrian refugees, it is assumed that approximately 400,000 Syrian refugees that are either not registered or registered to a different city but residing in Istanbul. Therefore, in total Istanbul absorbs nearly one million Syrian refugees regardless of their legal status (Kuru and Şar 2020). A high proportion of Syrian refugees are among the most vulnerable population, with women and children making up approximately 70% of this Syrian population. Considering this vulnerability, living in Istanbul poses different challenges to Syrian refugees. In theory, those who are registered have access to the basic rights in education, healthcare system, and social services as well as the formal labor market, but in reality, they face many barriers to accessing those services and enjoying their rights on the ground. However, undocumented Syrian refugees lack any rights, and they



are mostly isolated in their neighborhood due to security reasons as they are at risk of deportation.

Turkey had already been suffering from economic fragility in the pre-covid period. Hence, the overall economic impact of Covid-19 resulted in the decrease of average income, impoverishment, and welfare loss and was more observable in the big cities like Istanbul. The decrease in average income differs based on the level of income groups as the socioeconomically low-income groups suffer from higher income loss than the high-income groups (Bayar, Günçavdi, and Levent 2020). The current economic support measures cause an asymmetric impact on the income of different segments, which also enhances the unequal income distribution (Bayar, Günçavdi, and Levent 2020, 16). Therefore, low-level income groups are most likely to lose their income and least likely to benefit from social protection programs such as short-time work allowances which targets the population within the formal labor workforce. Within this segment, Syrian refugees, due to their heavy employment in the informal labor market, constitute one of the most vulnerable groups, leading to a dramatic loss of income from which they are at risk of falling into extreme poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Syrian refugees lost their income and occupation with a higher rate compared to Turkish nationals across Turkey. Throughout the pandemic, 50% of Turkish nationals declared that they faced the loss of income, while among refugees the rate is up to 88% (Özkul 2020, 12). Before the pandemic the unemployed rate of the refugee population was 17.74%, which dramatically increased to 88.59% afterwards (ASAM 2020). Over 90% of refugees declare that the sudden loss of income and jobs resulted in not being able to cover their daily expenses, including rent, bills, and food (Özkul 2020, 12). State support programs and the social safety

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<sup>5</sup> This paragraph has been excerpted and adapted from the final paper titled The Economic Integration: How to Mitigate the Negative Economic Impact Of Covid-19 on Refugees In Turkey, written by the student for the Political Economy of Reform Course Winter 2021 at CEU.

net excludes employees in the informal labor market, therefore eliminating the low-income vulnerable population who are mostly employed in the informal labor market, including Turkish nationals.<sup>6</sup>

Although the new normalization phase relatively eased the pain in terms of accessing the informal labor market, eventually, more child laborers have been absorbed by the informal labor market than in the pre-Covid era, according to the interviewees. Therefore, the immediate and longer-term consequences of the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 are observable, as the living conditions have worsened in the Istanbul context, especially during the first and second phases due to the inability to access Turkey's social protection shield program accommodating the public needs during the pandemic. These protections include short-time work allowances, unpaid leave cash support, unemployment benefits, and normalization support (AA News 2021).

#### **4.2.1 De-prioritization of Syrian Refugees**

Even before the Covid-19 outbreak, Syrian refugees' living conditions were not sufficient and poverty was one of the common conditions for Syrian refugees. The impact of Covid-19 has further muddled the living conditions for Syrian refugees in Istanbul. A consistent finding in all interviews was the apparent gap in developing Covid-19 measures to response to refugees' specific needs based on their existing precarious conditions. This gap highlights the limited scope of the social protection shield program. Notably, according to all interviewees, refugees have been deprioritized in public policies, resulting in worsening living conditions for Syrian refugees throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in Istanbul:

“There were no positive steps in terms of public institutions and their policies. There is zero attempt in the public policies context, so there is nothing we observed. On the

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<sup>6</sup> This paragraph has been excerpted and adapted from the final paper titled The Economic Integration: How to Mitigate the Negative Economic Impact Of Covid-19 on Refugees In Turkey which was written by the student for the Political Economy of Reform Course Winter 2021 at CEU.

contrary, nothing has been done for anything that prioritizes refugees or refugee-specific needs.”<sup>7</sup> (Dilara, NGO-4, 13 May 2021)

“First of all, in the eyes of the public institutions and the society, refugees were deprioritized. There had been such a mindset already at play towards refugees. Why should we care about refugees when our own citizens have been suffering from poverty? Let come to their problems later at least, this mindset stepped in immediately and prevailed throughout the COVID-19.”<sup>8</sup> (Ömür, NGO-3, 12 May 2021)

Covid-19 jeopardized the livelihoods and resilience of Syrian refugees and caused a significant loss of income for those who were already at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder in Istanbul. All interviewees' first response to the question regarding the policy response to alleviate this impact of Covid-19, was that Syrian refugees were excluded from the existing social support systems and there are no specific measures in place targeting refugee populations to prioritize their need. Refugees were included in the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's social aid program, but this appears to be the only social aid program developed by local governance capacity in which they were. However, this program lacks the capacity to reach out to refugees in need as it required the coordination and collaboration of civil society organizations, in order to share refugee contacts and support logistical operations in the distribution of relevant food, hygiene, and PPE packages.

Hence, by supporting the local governance capacities, civil society organizations have been taking a prominent role not only in improving their access to public services but also in plugging those gaps in the current system by providing complementary services.

<sup>7</sup> The original citation in Turkish is “Kamu kurumları ve politikaları anlamında hiçbir pozitif adım yoktu. Kamu politikaları kapsamında sıfır yani benim gözlemlediğim hiçbir şey yok. Ekstra işte mültecileri önceleyen ve mültecilere spesifik herhangi bir şey için hiçbir şey yapılmadı.”

<sup>8</sup> The original citation in Turkish is “Birincisi hem kamu hem toplum nezdinde mülteciler öncelik sıralamasından düştü. Zaten devrede olan şöyle bir psikoloji vardı. Kendi halkımız, yoksulluğa düşmüşken mültecilerle neden ilgilenelim. Onlara sıra sonra gelsin en azından, psikolojisi hemen devreye girdi ve covid boyunca hüküm sürdü.”

#### 4.2.2 Changing Vulnerabilities: Back to The Basic Needs

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, only 1.5% of the Syrian refugee population had been granted legal work permits since the work permit regulation went into force in 2016 (Kolaşın, Genç, and Kavuncu 2019). Therefore, the majority of the workforce has been disproportionately integrated into the informal labor sector (Uysal and Volkan 2020; Uysal, Uncu, and Akgül 2018). This led to a gap in their eligibility to benefit from social aid programs and had a major impact on increasing poverty by being excluded them from Covid-19 support programs developed by the state (ASAM 2020). As one of the significant outcomes of interviews, the loss of income has resulted in increasing poverty in households. Therefore, civil society organizations ended up adjusting their activities to cover the basic needs of Syrian refugees.

All interviewees agree on the major socio-economic impacts of Covid-19, and that most Syrian households are now unable to cover daily food and basic needs and unable to meet monthly rent, monthly household bills, including water, electricity, and gas, due to the significant loss of income. This finding is supported by the rapid assessment reports which analyzes emerging conditions to observe the immediate socio-economic impact on the refugees. According to the research conducted by The Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM), 63% of Syrian refugees have difficulty in accessing food, and 53% of them have difficulties in fulfilling basic hygiene requirements due to the fact that 88% of Syrian households lost their jobs due to the lockdown measures (ASAM 2020, 21). Another research conducted by Relief International reveals that 87% of Syrian households lost their jobs and 81% are unable to meet their basic needs anymore (Relief International 2020). The profound socio-economic impact of Covid-19 described by the interviewees shows an increasing level of poverty, to the extreme limits, among urban refugees as a new trend in vulnerabilities:

“We had been observing a bad trend, and it got worse with Covid-19. In other words, in the context of impoverishment, the curfews impoverished a particular segment

[refugees]. A large number of refugees lost their jobs as a result. It caused people to get worse and worse in terms of loss of income. We can define these conditions as extreme poverty, hunger and starvation. Demands for cash assistance, monthly rent, household bills have increased tremendously.”<sup>9</sup> (Deniz, NGO-7, 25 May 2021)

Also similarly raised by all interviewees, living conditions of refugees have reverted to conditions similar to those associated with their first arrival in Turkey, and that they are no longer able to cover their basic needs. First, this changing vulnerability profoundly stems from policy failures to integrate Syrian refugees into the formal labor workforce for years. Furthermore, the Covid-19 support aid programs only target those working formally under the social security system, excluding those who are part of the informal labor market. As a result, all civil society organizations interviewed, without exception, revised their projects to provide cash assistance, covering monthly rent and household bills to fill this gap in the current system to respond to the urgent needs of urban refugees.

#### **4.2.3 Increasing Limitation to The Access to The Public Services**

According to all interviewees, with the Covid-19 outbreak, the inadequacy of the existing policies is more observable on the ground. All of them have similarly described this challenge as doubling barriers to access to the public services and rights in social services as well as in the field of healthcare services. The Covid-19 outbreak caused healthcare service restrictions in Istanbul, especially for those who are undocumented or registered in different cities according to all interviewees:

“So when you look at the Temporary Protection Regulation, yes there are legal rights in theory. Yes, there are rights: Which institutions can they approach? Where can they apply for the social support provided by public authorities? It is put in a detailed way by the law, but it doesn't work like that on the ground in practice. So, refugee policy is

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<sup>9</sup> The original citation in Turkish “Zaten kötü bir gidişatti, covid ile gittikçe de kötüleşti. Yani yoksullaşma bağlamında, sokağa çıkma yasakları bir kesimi yoksullaştırdı. Çok büyük bir kesim işini kaybetti. İnsanların gelir anlamında daha gittikçe kötüye gitmelerine sebep oldu. Artık bu hallerini aşırı yoksulluk ve açlık olarak tanımlıyoruz. Nakdi yardım talepleri inanılmaz artmış durumda, kira ve fatura desteği talepleri inanılmaz artmış durumda.”

not functioning at the moment. Many refugees are ignored. Even they face difficulties to access in healthcare services in the middle of a pandemic.”<sup>10</sup> (Ceylan, NGO-2, 11 May 2021)

Towards the end of the first phase, the regulation for free of charge access to healthcare services regardless of the legal status was put into force so that the right to access Covid-19 treatment could be extended to undocumented refugees (Özvarış et al. 2020). However, all interviewees shared the cases depicting refugees reluctance to approach hospitals because of fear of Covid-19 diagnosis which would end up with job loss, stigmatization as well as deportation (Karadağ and Üstübcü 2021). Many cases showed that Syrian refugees showing the slight symptoms of Covid-19 recovered home on their own, and therefore might remain out of the statistics. Other similar example were given by two different interviewees (Dilara, NGO-4, 13 May 2021; Yaprak, NGO-7, 23 May 2021) in which refugees were charged after getting Covid-19 treatment. Civil society organizations advocated with the hospitals to cancel the payment in accordance with the Covid-19 health regulation.

Throughout the pandemic, civil society organizations expressed their doubled effort to ensure refugees' access to public services by disseminating reliable information about public services and Covid-19 measures, individual social and legal counseling, referrals, accompaniment, translation support as well as advocacy with the relevant public institutions. To this end, all of the interviewed organizations developed new communication strategies, creating WhatsApp communication groups for the efficient and reliable information dissemination among refugees as well as initiating online information seminars for health and legal rights. Moreover, a significant majority of the interviewed organizations established an emergency hotline in order to increase their outreach capacity from the beginning of the pandemic. Notably, two of the

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<sup>10</sup> The original citation in Turkish is “Yani baktığınızda yani geçici koruma ile ilgili genelgeye baktığınızda orada teoride haklar var. Evet var haklar. Nereye başvurabilir? Ne yapabilir, destek için nerelere başvuru başvurabilir? Detaylandırılmış durumda ama pratik hiç öyle işlemiyor. Yani işlemiyor. Göç politikası şu anda şey yok mesela çok mülteciler göz önünde değil. Pandeminin ortasında sağlık sistemine bile etkin erişemiyorlar.”

interviewees described the emergency hotline and communication groups as a novel hub between public services and Syrian refugees in İstanbul.

#### **4.2.4 Duties' Devolvement to Civil Society Organizations**

Civil society organizations' referral mechanisms have been providing an advocacy tool on the ground. They have been advocating with the public authorities to fulfill their duties according to the existing laws to increase Syrian refugees' access to public services. This pattern has also been an essential component of civil society actors in the field throughout the Covid-19 outbreak. One of this research's striking outcomes is that all interviewees have observed a reversal of this pattern. In other words, they have received an increasing number of referrals from public authorities compared to the pre-Covid period. A notable finding of this study is that all organizations are in consensus that public authorities did not fulfill their responsibilities, which resulted in the devolvement of those state responsibilities to civil society organizations during Covid-19. This devolvement to civil society organizations is mainly observed in the fields of woman protection, child protection, and financial support to vulnerable cases, exemplified by specific cases as public officers regularly get in touch with civil society organizations.

Firstly, the public authorities' failure to protect vulnerable refugees from Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) a consensus of all interviewees. Public officers have asked for a solution to SGBV cases discharged from state women shelters who technically continue to be under state protection. Three different organizations similarly stated that they were asked to provide accommodation for SGBV cases who were discharged from state shelter, although none of the organizations had the facilities:

“Recently, we witnessed that several [refugee] women [survivor of domestic violence] in the [state] women's shelter tried to be discharged after their 6 months of stay there. They refer these cases to us. Where will these women go? How will they stand on their

own? We are in the middle of Covid-19! I mean, they try to devolve the responsibility of the state to civil society.”<sup>11</sup> (Lara, NGO-4, 14 May 2021)

“They [state women shelter] refer us and say, “We are discharging her. Find a solution for her; otherwise, she will stay on the street.” Excuse me, how can you throw her responsibility at me when I’m already trying to refer survivors of domestic violence cases to your shelters. We have encountered such requests from at least 3 women’s shelters from three different districts during Covid-19, and I think it was devastating and unacceptable. Moreover, two of the women also had children.”<sup>12</sup> (Serpil, NGO-6, 22 May 2021)

In addition to the state failing to provide solutions to SGBV cases, civil society organizations observed inadequate responses to the increasing amount of child protection-related cases, such as child labor due to the worsening socio-economic conditions and school dropouts as a result of distant learning. As a symbolic example of public authorities’ failure to respond to the child protection needs, one interviewee told of when a relevant civil society organization was asked to cover the bus ticket of a child who is a survivor of child abuse to return of their registered city of residence. The child and her mother’s protection request by the state was rejected in İstanbul and they were forced to return their registered city of residence to the household where the child was abused. Within their capacity, civil society organizations have advocated with relevant institutions to appeal such cases and that the organizations should fulfill their responsibilities in accordance with the law.

Lastly, the main impact of Covid-19 on Syrian refugees is the financial hardship in the urban context. Providing financial support to refugees in need was devolved to civil society

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<sup>11</sup> The original citation in Turkish is “Çok yakın zamanda kadın sığınma evindeki kadının daha doğrusu birkaç kadının, 6 ayımız doldu, hadi dışarı çıkın diye çıkarılmaya çalıştığına mesela şahit olduk. Bize yönlendiriyorlar. Bu kadınlar nereye gidecek ne yapacak? Nasıl ayakta duracak? Kovidin ortasındayız. Devlet üzerindeki sorumluluğu sivil toplumun üstüne atmaya çalışıyor.”

<sup>12</sup> The original citation in Turkish is “Mesela bize yönlendiriyor diyor ki “Biz onu çıkarıyoruz. Sokakta kalacak. Ona bir çare bulun”. Pardon da ben sokakta kalanı zaten sana yerleştirmeye çalışırken sen nasıl bana atarsın? Biz en az 3 tane üç değişik ilçeden kadın sığınma evinden, devletin kadın sığınma evinden böyle bir şeyle karşılaştık ve bence bu çok korkunç ve kabul edilemez bir şeydi. Üstelik kadınlardan iki tanesinin de çocukları vardı.”



organizations. All interview participants declared that they had received increasing referrals from state-based organizations, mainly for financial support to Syrian refugees to cover their rent and monthly bills. Different public authorities requested civil society organizations to provide rent support because they lacked the relevant financial resources and faced bureaucratic challenges to find a solution to the increasing rent support requests by Syrian refugees.

Therefore, civil society organizations' intervention in the field is not only limited to their adapted activities into the Covid-19 context but also their increasing role in advocating with public authorities, especially in the protection-related cases.

### **4.3 Civil Society Organization's Role and Intervention**

Civil society organizations have adapted all their counselling activities for remote working conditions due to the Covid-19 measures except for the accompaniment of vulnerable cases and hygiene, PPE, and food aid distribution activities in the field. Therefore, civil society organizations updated their services and restructured their human resources to tackle the deprioritized conditions of Syrian refugees and their increased barriers to accessing public services. Accordingly, all organizations revised their projects to respond to the basic needs and food insecurity that was out of the scope of their activities before the Covid-19 outbreak, except for vulnerable cases. They have also revised their organizational vulnerability assessment schemes based on the changing dynamics of Syrian refugees in the urban context, as the majority are at risk of falling into extreme poverty. Furthermore, they adjusted their activities into new digital solutions such as informative online activities, WhatsApp communication groups, traditional telephone hotlines, and emergency hotlines. These effective operational changes highlight their novel role as a hub between public services and Syrian refugees in the Covid-19 context.

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, civil society organizations had a significant role in easing the burden on public authorities by their service delivery and thus had already partly dedicated their capacities to responsibility-sharing (GIZ 2021). Their role was described for the pre-covid era by Sunata and Tosun (2018) as “In short, civil society does not fill the gaps, but plugs the gaps other than changing unequal social relations” (686). Based on the findings of this study, civil society organizations’ complementary role to state actors has tremendously increased because of the changing vulnerabilities in the urban context escalated by the Covid-19 measures.

The interviewees were asked “In your opinion, what would happen to the Syrian refugees if none of the civil society organizations existed in Istanbul during the Covid-19 context?” All of the responses confirm that civil society took a lead role in reaching out to refugee communities due to the de-prioritization of refugees in the public response:

“Selma: That would be very terrible. It would lead to a disaster. So it would be very, very bad. It would be really horrible.

Sema Merve Is: In what sense would it be terrible? Could you please describe it?

Selma: There is still no proper system. It is still a huge problem. There are not sufficient systems in hospitals and official institutions in place. We still provide those supports or we struggle with the institutions about their duties to provide those services. For example, it would be terrible for the women who are the survivor of gender-based violence. Without the support of civil society, it would have been a great disaster [for refugees].”<sup>13</sup> (Selma, NGO-4, 18 May 2021)

For this particular question, all of the interviewees’ first reactions were all similar, in that it would be/lead to.... a disaster (Ceylan, NGO-2, 11 May 2021; Selma, NGO-4, 18 May 2021;

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<sup>13</sup> The original citation in Turkish:

Selma: Oo çok fena olurdu. Disaster olurdu. Yani çok çok kötü olurdu. Gerçekten çok kötü olurdu.

Sema Merve Is: Ne anlamda kötü olurdu? Tarif eder misin?

Selma: Ee hala bir sistem yok. O hala çok büyük bir sıkıntı. Hastanelerde ve resmi kurumlarda yeterince sistem yok. Hala o destekleri biz veriyoruz ya da kurumlarla o desteği vermesi gerektiği ile ilgili mücadeleyi biz ediyoruz. Şiddet mağduru kadınlar için bile korkunç olurdu. Sivil toplum üzerinden destekler olmasa büyük bir felaket yaşanırdı.

Yaprak, NGO-7, 23 May 2021), be disaster scene (Dilara, NGO-4, 13 May 2021; Deniz, NGO-7, 25 May 2021), a catastrophic situation (Leyla, NGO-5, 20 May 2021) or tragedy (Serpil, NGO-6, 22 May 2021). This reaction was justified by the respondents afterwards on how civil society organizations presence filled a significant gap:

“It would definitely be a catastrophic situation. Many families are entirely in need of help. Yes, some of them are able to access the services provided by the public. However, until now, if we did not hear on the news that refugees have not died of starvation as mass groups, this would be thanks to the supports provided by the civil society organizations.”<sup>14</sup> (Leyla, NGO-5, 20 May 2021)

Only one of the interviewees (Serpil, NGO-6, 22 May 2021) was more optimistic that this will eventually push public authorities to respond to the existing needs. Similarly, all of the responses reveal that public authorities depend on civil society’s presence in terms of protection of refugees. The interviewees were in consensus that civil society organizations fulfilled a critical role throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to improve the socio-economic well-being of Syrian refugees and also to increase their access to the public services in Istanbul:

“Civil society is a very crucial mediator institution [between refugees and the state]. In other words, it plays a critical role in terms of consolation and soothing refugees conditions. They cannot make their voices heard by the state. However, we have provided a huge space to hear their voice or to enable them to overcome their challenges.”<sup>15</sup> (Hasan, NGO-5, 19 May 2021)

“Many non-governmental organizations provided legal and psychological counseling and took a dire role in making people amplify their voices and challenges. You hear their voice, and you make their voice heard by the state. We fulfill an important task to bridge this gap.”<sup>16</sup> (Yaren, NGO-1, 11 May 2021)

<sup>14</sup> The original citation in Turkish is “Katastrofik bir durum olurdu kesinlikle. Tamamen yardıma muhtaç pek çok aile var. Erişebilen erişiyor bir şekilde şu anda topluca açlıktan ölmediler haberi duymuyorsak bu sivil toplumun sağladığı destekler sayesinde oluyor.”

<sup>15</sup> The original citation in Turkish is “Sivil toplum çok ciddi anlamda bir ara kuruluş. Yani teskin etme anlamında teselli etme anlamında çok önemli bir rolde. Devlete seslerini duyuramıyorlar. Ama seslerini duyurabilmek ya da dertlerini çözebilmek için çok büyük bir alan sağladık.”

<sup>16</sup> The original citation in Turkish is “Pek çok sivil toplum kuruluşu hukuki psikolojik ona pek çok anlamda destek olmakla birlikte kişilerin bu sorunlarını duyurmak konusunda da çok ciddi görev aldı. Sesini duyuyorsun ve sesini duyuruyorsun, bu köprü göreviyle çok büyük bir rol aldık ve görev aldık.”

## CONCLUSION

By benefitting from the qualitative interview-based approach and existing grey literature, this study has assessed the Covid-19 implications on Syrian refugees in Istanbul and how civil society organizations have functioned in the field with the changing living dynamics during the Covid-19 outbreak. As widely discussed in this study, one of the most utmost challenges in coping with the Covid-19 circumstances for Syrian refugees is their socio-economic status caused by their heavy employment in the informal labor market in İstanbul, which resulted in their inaccessibility to the existing Covid-19 specific developed policies. The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 resulted in food insecurity for Syrian refugees and their inability to cover basic needs as the new trend in vulnerabilities. Similarly, the overall response from interviewees highlights that the Covid-19 response measures do not incorporate a refugee-specific needs approach, and basically excludes Syrian refugees in the urban context. Therefore, similar to the pre-Covid era, civil society organizations maintained their substantial role of being the hub between public services and Syrian refugees with the increasing devolvement of public authorities' duties to civil society organizations in refugee protection.

The finding of this study is only limited to the assessment and perspective of the pre-defined civil society organizations and does not include the other typologies working in the field in Istanbul. Although the study's findings are related to the triangle of civil society organizations, Syrian refugees, and public actors, this study's scope is only profoundly engaged with one aspect of this triangle and incorporates the civil society organizations perspective. Therefore, further studies would complement this study by engaging with Syrian refugees and public actors as well as other typologies of civil society organizations to assess the challenges of the Covid-19 outbreak.

The research findings provided a thorough questioning of deficiencies of policies through the double barriers of public services and de-prioritization of Syrian refugees by exploring the possibilities of civil society organizations' roles to bridge the gap during the Covid-19 pandemic. To this end, this research aims to contribute to future studies in migration governance as well as projects supporting refugees' rights as the unequal distribution of resources and public services will require new struggles due to the changing dynamics of the Covid-19 impact worldwide.

## APPENDIX 1. THE LIST OF ONLINE INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Interviewee no.	Pseudonyms	The organization code	The position of the interviewee	The date of interview
1	Yaren	NGO-1	Protection officer	11 May 2021
2	Ceylan	NGO-2	Program officer	11 May 2021
3	Ömür	NGO-3	Program manager	12 May 2021
4	Dilara	NGO-4	Case worker	13 May 2021
5	Lara	NGO-4	Program officer	14 May 2021
6	Selma	NGO-4	Field worker	18 May 2021
7	Hasan	NGO-5	Project manager	19 May 2021
8	Leyla	NGO-5	Program officer	20 May 2021
9	Serpil	NGO-6	Field worker	22 May 2021
10	Derya	NGO-7	Protection officer	23 May 2021
11	Yaprak	NGO-7	Protection officer	23 May 2021
12	Deniz	NGO-7	Field worker	25 May 2021

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