HOW ETHNIC MINORITIES PERCEIVE AND RESPOND TO NEWCOMERS:

A STUDY OF KURDS AND SYRIANS IN AYDIN, TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Kurds; a native ethnic minority with a distinctive history of migration and stigmatization, perceive and evaluate Syrian newcomers who have recently settled in long-established Kurdish migrant neighborhoods in Aydın.

Drawing on Jenkins's theory of social identity, boundary literature, and insights from social psychology on intergroup relations, the study adopts a constructionist perspective to reveal how the boundaries of Kurdishness are produced and negotiated. Based on fieldwork and in-depth interviews, it examines the perceived similarities and differences shaping inclusive and exclusive attitudes.

The findings show that identifications intersect and emerge as moral articulations, challenging explanations that reduce anti-immigrant attitudes solely to national or taken-for-granted ethnic identities, and demonstrating how these processes are shaped within a specific micro-context.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES, FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey, similar to many examples worldwide in the 20th century, represents a "nation-building" project carried out by the Kemalist regime. The new regime attempted boundary expansion (Wimmer, 2008) through a civic model of citizenship, defining all populations living in Anatolia—including Kurds and other minorities—under a civic notion of "Turkishness." In practice, however, this civic definition remained a vague constitutional principle and functioned instead as an assimilative identity tied to ethnic and cultural Turkish nationalism (Saracoglu, 2011; Yeğen, 2007; Ünlü, 2016).

Kurds, the majority of whom were Sunni Muslims, were considered as "founding element" of the republic, therefore viewed as not requiring minority protections (Meray, 1970), as non-Muslim communities in Anatolia. In practice, however, Kurds were not regarded as founding elements but rather, in the public and state discourse of the time, as "mountain Turks" who needed to be modernized and transformed into "civilized" Turks (Zeydanlıoglu, 2008). Accordingly, Kurdish linguistic, cultural, and political rights and demands were ignored, suppressed, and subjected to forced assimilation policies. As a result, in the predominantly Kurdish eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey, uprisings, widespread state violence, human rights violations, and mass killings occurred at various times (Zeydanlıoglu, 2012, Yeğen, 2004).

Up until the 2000s, the denial of the Kurds' existence as a distinct ethnic group and the strict limitations on their ethnicity-based political and cultural rights (Saracoglu, 2011) intensified, particularly after the 1980 military coup and the outbreak of the conflict between the state and the PKK, which launched its first attack in 1984 and has continued in various forms to the present day. Since then, state oppression against Kurds and securitization policies—legitimized through a persistent terrorism narrative—have characterized the "Kurdish issue" in Turkish politics.

Until the 2000s, the use of Kurdish in public spaces remained banned, and the government retained authority to deport and resettle Kurdish families to western Turkey (Çagaptay, 2006, Kirişci & Winrow,

1997). The armed conflict between the state and PKK, forced deportations, and village evacuations in the region led thousands of Kurds to migrate to western provinces of Turkey (Çelik, 2005, Van Bruinessen, 1991). Some studies estimate that approximately one million Kurds were internally displaced during 1990s (HÜNEE, 2006).

In addition to conflict-induced migration, the predominantly Kurdish eastern and southeastern regions lagged behind other parts of Turkey in socioeconomic development and living standards. Even today, reports by the Ministry of Interior ranking provinces by socioeconomic indicators place Kurdish-majority provinces at the bottom (see State Planning Organization, 2017). Consequently, since the 1980s, large-scale economic migration by Kurds to western provinces intensified. Whether conflict-based or economic, the primary destinations of Kurdish migrants have been the most developed regions of the country—especially the Marmara and Aegean regions, including Aydın (Mutlu, 1996).

Although the absence of ethnicity-based census data prevents precise measurement, Kurds are estimated to constitute approximately 20 percent of Turkey's population (Rawest Research, 2021). Aydın's population is 1,165,943(TUIK, 2023) and Kurds are estimated to comprise around 10 percent of the city's residents. Turkish Statistical Institute data on place of birth and residence indicate that the number of Aydın residents registered in provinces with predominantly Kurdish populations exceeds 100,000 (TUIK, 2023). Using the 2023 national census data, which include individuals' "province of origin," it is possible to estimate the number of people in western cities whose origins correspond to Kurdish-majority provinces as identified by Mutlu (1996). Considering that the children of these migrants were born in Aydın, the estimated 10 percent figure can be viewed as a minimum. Moreover, as in other western provinces such as İzmir, Istanbul, and Bursa, Kurds migrating to Aydın settled primarily in migrant neighborhoods—spatially isolated shanty neighborhoods, where they became socioeconomically and spatially segregated from wider society (Ayata & Yükseker, 2007, HÜNEE, 2006; İçduygu et al., 2001).

Kurdish migrants in western provinces face discrimination and stigmatization in daily life (Baser & Çelik, 2014) and are often perceived as the most "othered" group (Çelik et al., 2017), and found themselves as occupying the lowest status in society(Karacanta, 2002). Similarly, recent studies show that 70 percent of Kurdish youth living in western provinces report exposure to discrimination in their daily lives (Rawest Research, 2021).

For instance, Saracoglu's (2011) ethnographic study in İzmir, a province adjacent to Aydın, demonstrates that locals externally categorize Kurdish migrants using stereotypes such as ignorant, cultureless, separatist, and invaders, leading to their exclusion (Saracoglu, 2011, p. 26). This stigmatization is also evident in media representations of Kurds, as it revealed by some studies(Aktan, 2007, Esen, 2007, Bora, 2006). Bora's study (2006), in particular, shows how Kurds are depicted as inferior, criminal, violent, and incompatible with modern life.

Today, in the migrant neighborhood of Aydın where Kurds reside in large numbers, another group lives side by side with them—Syrians—who share similar, and in some ways more difficult, experiences. After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, millions of Syrians were forced to migrate to neighboring countries and beyond. Due to geographical proximity and the Turkish government's open-door policy under the Erdoğan administration, Turkey became the primary destination for Syrians under temporary protection (UNHCR, 2015). Following mutual agreements between Turkey and the European Union in 2015–2016 (Müftüler-Baç, 2021), the number of registered Syrians in Turkey reached nearly four million by 2020 (Düvell, 2019). While many Syrians settled in the southeastern provinces bordering Syria, considerable numbers also migrated to economically developed western cities such as Istanbul, İzmir, Bursa, and Aydın. According to the Presidency of Migration Management (2025) the Syrian immigrants under temporary protection status in Aydın is 7,828. Syrian immigrants, like Kurds, often settled in shanty neighborhoods of large cities—frequently the same ones where Kurds had long resided (ICG, 2016) and sustained themselves through informal economic sectors (Saraçoğlu & Bélanger, 2019; Koca, 2016).

According to the International Crisis Group (2018), an estimated 750,000–950,000 Syrian refugees work in Turkey's informal economy. Furthermore, similar to Kurds, newcomers faced stigmatization and discrimination in daily life, national politics, and media representations(Duman, 2023, Güvengez et al., 2020). Qualitative and quantitative studies show that Syrians are widely perceived as an economic and cultural threat, disrupters of urban life, and danger for the national cohesion, therefore the wider Turkish society want Syrians to leave (Erdoğan, 2020, Saraçoğlu & Bélanger, 2021, Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018, Şar & Kuru, 2020). For instance, Yitmen and Verkuyten (2018) examined behavioral intentions toward Syrians among self-identified Turkish citizens and found that higher levels of national identification were associated with more negative and fewer positive behavioral intentions, by explaining it through threat perceptions and self-categorization theory. Similarly, Saraçoğlu and Bélanger (2019), in their study on anti-Syrian sentiment in İzmir, identified motivations rooted in sentiments of economic loss, as well as of loss of national and social cohesion.

As these examples illustrate, although a substantial body of research exists on Syrians, most studies explain anti-Syrian sentiment and attitudes primarily through national identity. The literature remains insufficient in examining relations between Syrians and Turkey's internal ethnic minority -Kurds- especially in contexts like Aydın, where both groups co-reside. Yet as Gorodzeisky and Glickman (2017) argue, minority and majority groups' perceptions operate differently; thus, attitudes toward immigrants are shaped by different mechanisms.

In this regard, Duman's (2023) study and Kılıçaslan's (2016) work on Syrian Kurdish refugees are important contributions focusing on Kurds and Syrians. However, Duman's research was conducted in predominantly Kurdish provinces and explains intergroup relations through a social-psychological framework, while Kılıçaslan centers specifically on Syrian Kurds and Turkish Kurds.

Thus, this study is significant in that it seeks to fill this gap by examining the perceptions and attitudes of Kurds who have previously experienced similar processes and who currently live alongside Syrians.

Drawing on interviews with Kurdish residents of an isolated migrant neighborhood where Kurds are densely settled, and by using Jenkins's theory of social identity (2014) this research explores internal and collective identifications to capture the boundaries of Kurdishness, then turns to interviewees' external categorizations to analyze processes of stigmatization and destigmatization toward Syrians**.** Accordingly, the central research question guiding this study is: How do Kurds—who have themselves experienced migration or stigmatization—construct or blur symbolic boundaries toward Syrians, and in what ways do their social identities shape their tendencies toward stigmatization or destigmatization, inclusion or exclusion, and positive or negative perceptions?

In this respect, this study contributes to the literature in two ways: first, by offering insights into the boundaries of Kurdishness among Kurds who migrated to western Turkey—an understudied and sensitive issue; and second, by analyzing the perceptions and attitudes of this ethnic minority toward Syrians, a topic that remains insufficiently explored in migration research. The thesis is structured into five chapters. The first chapter provides a comprehensive background, outlining the significance of the research topic and presenting the central research question within the context of existing literature. The second chapter reviews the literature on intergroup and inter-ethnic relations, with a particular focus on social psychology, and examines conceptual work on groups, ethnicity, and symbolic boundaries, highlighting how these studies inform and relate to the current approach. The third chapter presents the methodological framework of the study, including the research design, data collection procedures, sampling strategy, and analytical approach, as well as a detailed description of the field site and its relevance to the research. The fourth chapter offers the analysis of the interviews, examining participants' constructions and meaning-making processes regarding Kurdishness and tracing how these interpretations shape their perceptions of Syrians. Finally, the fifth chapter discusses the findings in relation to the broader literature and theoretical frameworks, and offers concluding reflections.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

"I sympathize easily with the Negro who is more likely to have people against him than the Jew. I know what it is like to be discriminated against. How could I be prejudiced?" (Allport, 1954, p. 154).

As can be seen in this quote from Allport's The Nature of Prejudice, there is a belief that members of a stigmatized group can relate to members of other stigmatized groups. Indeed, the social psychology literature, largely based on experimental studies, has highlighted the outcomes of positive intergroup relations among minority and stigmatized groups. For example, Cortland et al. (2017) demonstrated that emphasizing shared experiences between groups can foster positive intergroup relations within minority populations through the mechanism of intergroup empathy. Similarly, Just and Anderson (2015) applied this framework to immigration studies through the minority solidarity thesis, which posits that immigrants or minorities can develop a sense of solidarity and kinship with other migrants based on shared experiences. They further concluded that migration experiences lead individuals to evaluate immigration more positively compared to those without a migration background. Building on this, Neureiter and Schulte (2024) argue that social identity and perceived cultural proximity among immigrants play a crucial role in determining whether minority solidarity emerges. Their findings suggest that immigrants tend to perceive less threat and exhibit more favorable attitudes when they share common racial, ethnic, or religious identities (Neureiter & Schulte, 2024). Similarly, Craig and Richeson (2016) demonstrated that a shared "disadvantaged" identity can transcend in-group–out-group boundaries and elicit more positive attitudes toward stigmatized out-groups within minority and immigrant populations. However, they emphasized the importance of identity dimensions in determining whether perceived discrimination leads to coalition or derogation - specifically, whether individuals experience stigma along the same identity dimension (e.g., race) or across different dimensions (e.g., race and gender) (Craig & Richeson, 2016, p. 22). They concluded that stigmatization within the same identity dimension may foster supportive and coalitional attitudes, whereas stigmatization across different identity dimensions is more likely to produce derogation

rather than solidarity. Consistent with this theoretical perspective, recent studies have shown that ethnic minorities tend to hold more negative attitudes toward culturally distant groups than toward those perceived as culturally similar (Meeusen et al., 2019). Regarding religious identity, Mustafa and Richards (2019), in their study conducted across several Western European countries, found that Muslims consistently held more favorable attitudes toward other Muslims than the general native population did, largely due to their shared religious identity. In most cases, Muslims were preferred over other types of migrants. Their findings align with other research which posits that people who identify themselves as belong to religious communities are less likely to have anti-immigrant attitudes (see Boomgaarden & Freire, 2009). The authors also highlighted the positive effects of intergroup contact and interaction: living in ethnically diverse areas with a greater presence of minorities was associated with more favorable attitudes than living in areas with few or no minorities (Mustafa & Richards, 2019). Indeed, as early as *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), Allport emphasized the positive influence of contact on interpersonal and intergroup relations: *"People who had become neighbors did not riot against each other. The students of Wayne University—white and black—went to their classes in peace throughout Bloody Monday. And there were no disorders between white and black workers in the war plants..." (Allport, 1954, p. 261)*.

Building on Allport's work, recent studies using Intergroup Contact Theory (Hewstone, 2015) suggest that positive intergroup attitudes develop through meaningful and constructive contact between groups. Lastly, when we look at the Turkish context, similar to the quantitative studies mentioned above, qualitative studies by Kılıçaslan (2016), Duman (2021), and Saracoglu & Belanger (2019) have demonstrated that - while the overall findings do not indicate uniformly positive attitudes – some Kurdish participants displayed empathy and positive responses toward Syrian immigrants, a tendency that appears to stem from their own experiences of migration and minority-based disadvantage.

Other body of literature predicts that the disadvantaged position of established ethnic minorities makes them particularly susceptible to perceiving zero-sum competition and identity threats associated with the

arrival of new immigrant groups, which can foster prejudicial attitudes toward these groups (see Meeusen et al., 2019). Early theoretical frameworks, including group position theory (Blumer, 1958), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) suggest that the origins of prejudice are closely linked to perceived intergroup threats, competition over resources, and the pursuit of a positive social identity. These processes can shape negative perceptions and attitudes not only among majority groups but also within minority populations, particularly toward other immigrant groups. From a social identity perspective, group membership provides individuals with a sense of belonging and a framework for self-evaluation, guiding behavior through social categorization. Individuals derive social identities through comparisons with other groups, influencing both self-perception and intergroup interactions. Strong in-group identification can foster favoritism toward one's own group, generate stereotypes, and heighten sensitivity to perceived threats, ultimately contributing to prejudice and intergroup conflict (Blumer, 1958, Quillian, 1996). Complementing this identity-based approach, theories focusing on material interests, such as realistic group conflict theory and its subsequent extension, integrated threat theory (Stephan et al.,2000), emphasize that perceived competition over tangible resources and social status can lead to intergroup prejudice. Stephan and colleagues identify four types of threat—realistic, symbolic, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes—that mediate the relationship between socio-political attitudes and prejudice. Realistic threats concern material resources, such as jobs or housing (Neureiter, 2022, p.1044) whereas symbolic threats relate to cultural distinctiveness and the values and norms of the in-group (Fouka & Tabellini, 2021, Ellemers et al., 2012). Based on this set of literature, individuals perceiving competition over scarce resources often generalize these threats across entire out-groups, linking personal economic circumstances to the development of prejudiced attitudes. Consistent with these perspectives, research indicates that established ethnic minorities, due to their vulnerable social and economic positions, are particularly likely to perceive zero-sum competition and identity threats from new immigrant arrivals, which may foster negative attitudes toward these groups (Meeusen et al., 2019). Empirical studies across Europe have shown that ethnic minorities can exhibit anti-immigrant attitudes

themselves (Callens et al., 2014). For example, Meeusen et al. (2019) found that Turkish and Moroccan migrants in Belgium perceived Eastern European newcomers as competitors, which was associated with negative attitudes, while Sarrasin et al. (2018) noted that although competition for material resources was apparent among immigrants, empathetic responses also often mitigated thes tensions. Barth's (1969) concept of ethnic boundaries offers a relational perspective, he directed attention toward the processes through which ethnic boundaries are maintained and negotiated, rather than analyzing the content of ethnicity, such as the cultural traits or historical narratives associated with ethnic groups (Barth, 1969, p. 14). He claimed that boundaries are to be found, and emerge from interactions in which individuals and groups negotiate interests within specific social and ecological constraints, rather than being pre-determined features of the groups. Similarly, Bobo and Hutchings (1996) applied a relational logic to explain racism, drawing on Blumer's (1958) group position theory, which posits that in-group fear of out-groups claiming resources or rights drives competition and prejudice. Building on these insights, Verkuyten and Martinovic (2017) introduce the concept of "ownership threats," suggesting that individuals and groups develop a sense of collective ownership over resources and social spaces. When this ownership is perceived to be challenged, in-group members may assert control and enforce boundaries to protect entitlements. For example, original residents of neighborhoods may perceive changes to the physical or social environment caused by newcomers as threats to their local identity, legitimizing exclusionary behaviors (Verkuyten, 1997). However, as Elias and Scotson's (1994) established-outsider model illustrates, ownership and exclusion do not always require ethnic or national differences. Their study of Winston Parva(pseudonym) in the UK showed that long-established residents maintained dominance and stigmatized newcomers through social cohesion and collective power, even in the absence of ethnic distinctions, highlighting that perceived ownership and status hierarchies alone can generate exclusionary behaviors. Furthermore, several sociologists have offered important critiques of the social psychology literature discussed above.

For instance, Wimmer (2008) criticizes a prevailing tendency within both sociology and social psychology to reify notions of "collective identity" and "group relations." He argues that such approaches often take

ethnic divisions as given, rather than explaining how and why these boundaries emerge and are maintained. Building on Barth's (1969) work on ethnic boundaries, Wimmer (2008) advances a framework of boundary-making strategies, illustrating how actors actively construct, maintain, or transform social boundaries within broader sociopolitical contexts (Wimmer, 2008). A particularly relevant concept from Wimmer's framework for the present study is what he terms "boundary blurring." According to Wimmer (2008, p.989) actors seeking to transcend ethnic boundaries and categorizations often do so by emphasizing cross-cutting social cleavages that reduce the salience of ethnicity. He demonstrates that deliberate emphasis on non-ethnic identifications - such as religious, professional, or class-based affiliations - can undermine the legitimacy of rigid national, ethnic, or racial divisions. Religion, for example, serves as one of the most politically salient forms of cross-cutting identification, encompassing Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism. Drawing on this insight, it is plausible that in the context of shared religious identity between Kurds and Syrians, individuals who foreground their religious belonging may contribute to the blurring of ethnic boundaries between these two groups. Similarly, sociologist Michèle Lamont offers a parallel critique of reductionist tendencies in social psychology, particularly those that conceptualize group identity primarily as a cognitive process rooted in in-group/out-group differentiation. Such approaches, Lamont argues, treat boundary formation as a universal human tendency toward in-group favoritism and out-group bias, overlooking the cultural and contextual variability of these processes (Lamont et al., 2016). Lamont (2002) contends that this line of research is often overly top-down, relying on a priori categories and deductive hypotheses. Instead, she advocates for an inductive, interview-based approach that focuses on individuals' narratives of lived experience, through which boundaries are actively constructed and negotiated in everyday life. This method enables researchers to assess the permeability and relative salience of different types of boundaries -socioeconomic, moral, or cultural- across varying national and group contexts (Lamont et al., 2016).

Michèle Lamont's works in the field of boundary studies, draw attention to the moral and cultural dimensions of boundaries and to the mechanisms through which they operate, by directing our focus to the

kinds of distinctions people draw, and evaluative criteria they employ to include or exclude others. To analyze these processes, Lamont introduces the concept of cultural repertoires, defined as sets of symbolic and moral tools through which individuals interpret and make sense of the social world. As she explains, *"Individuals do not develop narratives in isolation; rather, they construct narratives from historically constituted, culturally available templates - public narratives or meta-narratives - and in conversation with other narratives." (Lamont et al., 2016, p. 21).*

These cultural repertoires enable individuals to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and others. Symbolic boundaries are the perceptions of similarities and differences, likes and dislikes, and judgments of inferiority and superiority between groups (Lamont et al, 2016, pp.312). These symbolic lines are not simply reflections of pre-existing mental templates; rather, they are actively constructed, negotiated, and contested in everyday life within specific contexts. Lamont's previous empirical research illustrates these dynamics across multiple contexts.

In her collaborative work with Virág Molnár (2001), for instance, she examines how African American consumers have rearticulated racial and class boundaries through cultural and consumption practices. Similarly, in her comparative works, Money, Morals, and Manners (1992) and The Dignity of Working Men (2000), Lamont investigates how symbolic boundaries of worth are drawn across class and national contexts. She explores how upper-middle-class and working-class individuals in France and the United States construct moral hierarchies and distinctions based on available cultural repertoires. Through these analyses, Lamont demonstrates that symbolic boundaries -rooted in everyday evaluations of morality, respectability, and value- play a crucial role in producing and legitimizing social boundaries.

Moreover, the critiques of both Lamont and Wimmer mentioned above resonate with Brubaker's (2004) warning in his influential work, *Ethnicity Without Groups (2004),* regarding what he terms "groupism.". This concept refers to the tendency to view social groups as internally homogeneous, externally bounded, and discrete units, assumed to be the primary actors in social interactions and conflicts. As Brubaker writes: *"...I mean the tendency to reify such groups, speaking of Serbs, Croats, Muslims, and Albanians in the Former Yugoslavia, of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, of Jews and Palestinians in Israel and the occupied*

territories… of Turks and Kurds in Turkey… as if they were internally homogenous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes" (Brubaker, 2004, p. 8).

Given that this study investigates how members of an ethnic group perceive and respond to newcomer immigrants, a key question arises: how, and on what basis, should this ethnic group itself be defined? For example, can Kurdishness be accurately conceptualized as a single, unified identity? Some interviewees did not speak Kurdish, yet still constructed a sense of Kurdishness through self-ascription (Barth, 1969). Brubaker's perspective challenges the assumption that ethnic identities are fixed or internally uniform, emphasizing instead the fluid, negotiated, and context-dependent nature of group belonging. Therefore, he proposes that scholars should focus on analyzing groupness rather than groups as taken-for-granted analytical category. By following Brubaker's caution, I do not treat the Kurdish interviewees as members of a unified, bounded ethnic group; instead, I allow them to construct their own self-identifications and capture their sense of groupness. However, critiquing Brubaker, Richard Jenkins (2014) argues that groups, while imagined, are not merely imaginary; they are experientially real in everyday life (Jenkins, 2014, p.12). The minimal reality of a group, he suggests, is that its members are aware of its existence and recognize their own membership within it (Jenkins, 2014). As he explains:

"To invoke the first principle of social constructionism, groups are real if people think they are: they then behave in ways that assume that groups are real and, in so doing, construct that reality. They realise it. That groups are social constructions doesn't mean that they are illusions" (Jenkins, 2014, p.13).

At this point, my position aligns more closely with Jenkins. During my fieldwork, through conversations with neighborhood residents and the interviews I conducted, I observed that participants construct Kurdishness as a collective identity. Despite the diversity of beliefs and experiences among them, they actively articulate and reproduce this identity through references to Syrians, Turks, historical narratives, and cultural practices. Given that this study examines how individuals who identify as Kurdish -whether first-generation migrants or second-generation- perceive, respond to, and interact with newly arrived Syrian immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds, Jenkins's theory of social identity is particularly useful.

Jenkins suggests (Jenkins, 2008, p.55), rather than reify groups and categories as bounded entities, researchers should think instead about identities as constituted in the dialectic of collective identification, in the interplay of group identification and categorisation. In relation to the critique of reifying groups as unified and bounded entities, Jenkins' distinction between nominal and virtual identities offers an important analytical perspective. As he explains:

"Identity—whether ethnic or otherwise—can be understood as two interacting but independent entailments: a name (the nominal) and an experience (the virtual). The latter is, in a sense, what the name means; this is primarily a matter of its consequences for those who bear it, and can change while the nominal identity remains the same (and vice versa). The nominal and the virtual unite in the ongoing production and reproduction of identity and its boundaries. The nominal–virtual distinction recognizes that ethnic identities—and, indeed, all identities—are practical accomplishments rather than static forms. They are immanently, although not necessarily, variable." (Jenkins, 2008, p. 76).

In this framework, the nominal dimension of identity refers to the symbolic or classificatory aspect; how individuals define themselves, how they are defined by others, or how they are formally categorized by institutional authorities. The virtual dimension, on the other hand, captures the lived experience and the practical consequences of these internal and external definitions in everyday life. For instance, it is undeniable that being Kurdish in the city of Aydın during the 1990s is not the same as being Kurdish there in the 2020s of Turkey.

While the nominal identity "being Kurdish" remains constant, its virtual expression, that is, how it is experienced and enacted in daily life, may differ substantially over time and context. To sum up, Jenkins builds upon the social psychological approaches to social identity and Barth's processual perspective to develop a broader and more comprehensive theory of social identity. He begins with the proposition that identification is something that we do (Jenkins, 2014, p. 2), a process through which we determine "who's who and what's what" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 2). Every act of identification, he argues, involves two interdependent dimensions: similarity and difference. To define us necessarily entails defining them (Jenkins, 2014, p. 6). As he further notes, *"the notion of identity involves two criteria of comparison between*

persons or things: similarity and difference… it isn't just there; it's not a thing; it must always be established" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 18).

One of the key contributions of Jenkins's theory lies in the methodological distinction between internal identification and external categorization. Identity, he argues, exists and is continually reproduced through the interplay between these two processes, sustained by the dialectic between internal definitions (group identification) and external definitions (categorization). In articulating this relational process, Jenkins distinguishes between groups and categories. Groups refer to collectivities that are meaningful to their members; those who are self-aware and engaged in processes of internal definition. Categories, by contrast, refer to collectivities that are externally defined. In his words:

Whereas social groups define themselves, their name(s), their nature(s) and their boundary(ies), social categories are identified, defined and delineated by others. All collectivities can be conceptualized by reference to processes of group identification and social categorization" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 56).

His distinction between group identification -the internal definition of who we are- and social categorization -the external definition of who others say we are- highlights two processes that are inseparable within three interrelated *"orders" of human reality: the individual order (what goes on in people's minds), the interaction order (what happens between people), and the institutional order (the established ways of doing things) (Jenkins, 2014, p. 41).*

In this sense, Jenkins argues that identity is always social. Therefore, he suggests that all identities -whether individual or collective, ethnic or otherwise- should be understood as social identities (Jenkins, 2014).

Furthermore, Jenkins places domination and power relations at the core of his theoretical framework on group identification and social categorization. As he notes:

"social categorization, in particular, is intimately bound up with power relations and relates to the capacity of one group successfully to impose its categories of ascription upon another set of people" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 23).

Applying this logic to ethnic identities, Jenkins emphasizes that they are not fixed or unchanging but rather situational and context-dependent. The categorization of out-groups is intrinsic to in-group identification:

defining “us” necessarily involves defining “them.” Group identification presupposes that members perceive themselves as somehow similar to each other, and once relationships among members of a category entail mutual recognition of their categorization, the first steps toward group identification have been taken (Jenkins, 2014, p.134-135). In this regard, an ethnic identity might be strengthened or even generated, as a response to external categorization (Jenkins, 2008, p. 23). Jenkins thus argues that a category can certainly become a group, and groups are always categories as well. Ultimately, this transformation depends on *whose definition of the situation counts- in crude terms, power(Jenkins, 2014, p. 45).* Thus, some collectivities are in a stronger position to construct and assert their own identities, while others are more vulnerable to externally imposed categorizations. From the perspective of this research, Jenkins’ framework offers a useful analytical lens. Based on Kurdish participants’ social identity, which operates through the logic of dialectical relationship of internal identification and external categorization, as well as similarities and differences, it is possible to explore how they categorize Syrians. For instance, Kurdish participants may define themselves in contrast to Turks through their internal self-identifications; yet, when Syrians enter the frame, the same individuals may align with Turks as part of a broader social categorization process vis-à-vis Syrians.

As mentioned above, those who are categorized can, under certain conditions, develop a sense of similarity and transform into a group through processes of recognition, maintenance, or resistance. In the Turkish context, this dynamic can be observed among Kurds, who, depending on context, have both resisted and internalized externally imposed definitions. In this research, since the focus is on how Kurds perceive and respond to Syrians -and given that Syrians occupy a relatively weaker social position- I approach Syrians as a social category and Kurds as a social group.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Qualitative study and Interviews

This research employs a qualitative interview-based design grounded in a constructionist epistemology. Constructionism posits that social reality - and the identities, boundaries, and classifications through which people interpret it- is actively produced through interaction and discourse rather than passively reflected (Lim, 2024). Knowledge is thus constructed through interpretive engagement between researcher and participant. This stance aligns with Jenkins's (2008) processual understanding of identity as something continuously negotiated through internal and external definitions.

The analysis followed a broadly inductive and iterative logic. Inductive approaches build knowledge "from the bottom up," allowing empirical observations to guide the development of conceptual categories and interpretations. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for research concerned with the lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and social worlds of participants (Lim, 2024). Although the study was inductive, prior literature informed participant selection and the design of interview questions, without predetermining analytical outcomes. The analysis itself nevertheless remained grounded in participants' own accounts rather than in deductively applied theoretical expectations.

Twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in January 2025. Interviews were conversational and open-ended, eliciting narratives on Kurdishness, belonging, migration experiences, stigmatization, and perceptions of Syrians. In many cases, participants extended their narratives into life stories (Bryman, 2008), an indication that the format successfully provided space for elaboration on personal histories, social identifications, and intergroup encounters. This is consistent with qualitative research's aim to uncover the layered meanings and subjective interpretations people attach to their experiences (Byrne, 2012).

All interviews were conducted in Turkish, audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English, with a double-checking procedure ensuring consistency and accuracy. Data analysis was carried out using MAXQDA software following an iterative coding process inspired by the principles of grounded theory, as originally formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). While the study does not claim to implement grounded theory in its entirety, the approach embraced the logic of constructing analytic insights from the data itself through a continuous cycle of coding and comparison (Glaser, 1978). Initially, the data were examined closely, and codes capturing meaningful units of information were generated directly from participants' language. These codes were then progressively grouped into categories that reflected patterns and relationships across interviews, and subsequently organized into higher-order meta-categories. Through this process, open coding disaggregated the data into discrete units, axial coding identified and refined connections between concepts, and selective coding integrated these categories around central meta-categories, producing interpretive insights grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Inspired by Lamont et al. (2016), this multi-layered coding structure enabled the identification of patterns linking narratives of Kurdishness, belonging, migration, and stigmatization with perceptions of Syrians. By eliciting narratives of self-identification, Kurdishness, and migration before asking about Syrians, the interview structure placed participants' own meaning-making processes at the centre of the analytical framework. This sequencing made it possible to interpret attitudes toward Syrians not as isolated opinions but as relational extensions of participants' histories, identities, and boundary-making practices. MAXQDA's relational tools supported the identification of co-occurring interpretive patterns across interviews, further ensuring that the analysis remained systematic, iterative, and empirically grounded.

3.2 Research field and Participants

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Ovaeymir, a neighborhood located within the province of Aydın, western Turkey. As shown on the map below, Aydın is positioned along the Aegean coast, near the Greek islands. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the province has served as a transitional point for many Syrian refugees attempting to cross to Europe via its coastal areas. For instance, one local news report documents an incident in which a Syrian migrant attempted to swim to a Greek island (see Aydın Havadisleri, 2025).

Figure 3.1

Location of Aydın Province within Turkey map. Note. (Created with Datawrapper, 2025)

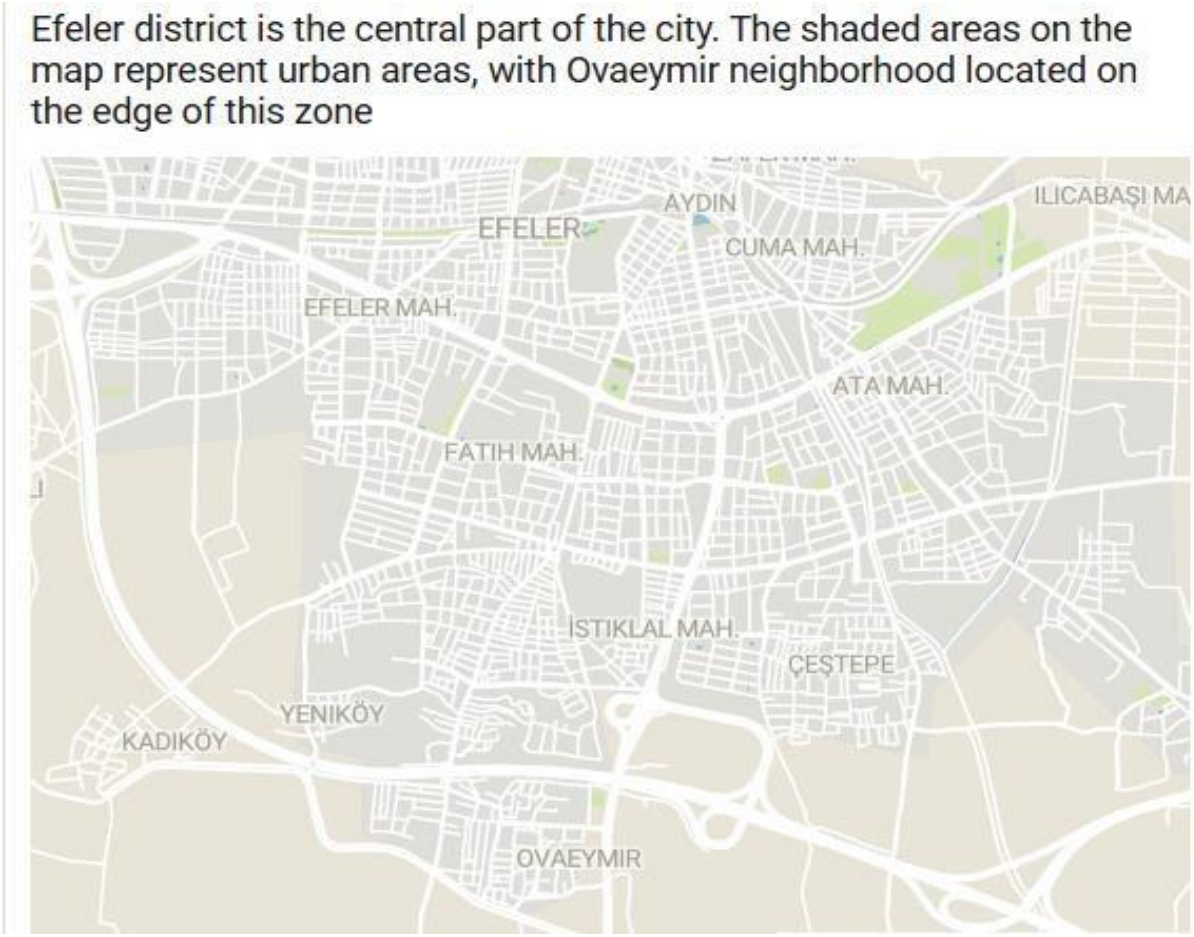

Figure 3.2 Location of Ovaeymir neighborhood within Efeler, Aydın Province. Created by Datawrapper, 2025.

Following the 2016 Turkey–EU migration agreements, Aydın became not only a transit site for Syrian refugees but also an increasingly attractive settlement location due to its lower housing costs and availability of seasonal employment opportunities compared to the neighboring metropolitan city of İzmir. The majority of Syrians who have settled in Aydın reside in the Ovaeymir neighborhood (field notes, 2025).

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, TÜİK(2023) the total population of Ovaeymir is 6,942. Although administratively part of the city center, as it can be seen in the figure above, Ovaeymir is located on the edge of the urban zone. Upon entering the neighborhood, one can easily sense a socio-spatial distinction from Aydın's central districts. Among Aydın's residents, Ovaeymir is commonly known as the area where a large Kurdish population resides. Socioeconomically, it ranks lower than other neighborhoods,

and rental prices are correspondingly cheaper(field notes, 2025). Within local discourse, it is often described as one of the least desirable places to live, associated with notions of crime and danger.

Historically, Ovaeymir has been shaped by internal migration, particularly waves of Kurdish migration to Aydın during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Consequently, the neighborhood is a predominantly Kurdish enclave, somewhat isolated from the urban mainstream. My interactions with local residents indicated that the community is relatively close-knit, with most inhabitants knowing each other(field notes, 2025). The neighborhood's Kurdish identity is also reflected in its local political organization. Unlike other parts of Aydın, Ovaeymir hosts an office of the pro-Kurdish political party DEM (formerly HDP). During the 2009 local elections, the Democratic Society Party (DTP)—the predecessor of the HDP, following the tradition of pro-Kurdish political parties frequently being banned and re-established under new names—won the municipal elections in Ovaeymir, then a town municipality. The last mayor before its administrative status was changed in 2012 was Muzaffer Yöndemli from DTP (Yeni Yaşam Gazetesi, 2023). Ovaeymir's Kurdish political visibility is further illustrated in annual Newroz celebrations, which are held exclusively in this neighborhood within Aydın. Newroz, celebrated every March 21, is a highly politicized event among Kurds in Turkey, symbolizing not only the arrival of spring but also resistance, cultural affirmation, and the political struggle for recognition. The pro-Kurdish DEM Party and its predecessors often use Newroz gatherings, including those in the Ovaeymir neighborhood, as platforms to express political solidarity and collective identity (see PİRHA, 2024). In Ovaeymir, these events have sometimes led to tensions with the police, as pro-Kurdish politicians attend the celebrations and clashes occasionally erupt. During such gatherings, police forces have intervened against residents attempting to celebrate, blocking neighborhood entrances and clashing with demonstrators who insisted on lighting the symbolic Newroz fire (see ANF News, 2016).

Besides Kurds, Ovaeymir has also become the primary settlement area for Syrians arriving in Aydın due to its affordable housing, low socioeconomic status, and pre-existing migrant composition. Although there are no official statistics regarding the Syrian population, local informants estimate that around 100 Syrian

households currently reside in the neighborhood (Field notes, 2025). Local news sources confirm this presence through coverage of incidents involving Syrian residents (see Aydın Post, 2024, Aydın Denge, 2025). Based on observations and informal conversations, Syrian residents primarily engage in the informal economy, particularly in waste collection, seasonal agricultural labor, and construction work (Field notes, 2025).

Figure 3.3. A Syrian resident collecting waste using a handcart in Ovaeymir neighborhood (Photograph by the author, 2025).

During my daily interactions in Ovaeymir, I observed that the term *"Suriyeliler"* ("the Syrians") is used by locals as a categorical label, referring to Syrian migrants as a homogeneous group (Field notes, 2025). While most comments carried negative connotations, some residents expressed neutral or positive sentiments. One notable observation of this social boundary occurred in the weekly Wednesday bazaar. Syrian vendors typically occupy a dusty roadside area informally referred to as the *"Syrian market"*, where products are sold cheaply and displayed on makeshift stalls, while Turkish and Kurdish vendors sell inside a fenced and organized marketplace. This spatial division subtly reproduces the symbolic and social boundaries between Syrians and the local Kurdish-Turkish population.

Figure 3.4. Syrian Market in Ovaeymir. (Photograph by the author, 2025).

The study includes twelve Kurdish participants residing in Ovaeymir, selected through a purposive sampling strategy(Campbell et al., 2020). The sampling design was guided by the analytical aim of comparing participants with and without actual migration experience. This distinction was important, as previous literature suggests that first-hand migration trajectories may shape individuals' capacity to relate to other migrant groups.

Accordingly, the sample was intentionally balanced to include both individuals who had migrated to Aydın (primarily during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s) and those born and raised in the neighborhood.

Fieldwork took place over a three-week period in January 2025, during which I visited the neighborhood daily and spent extended time in local social spaces. Recruitment occurred primarily through tea houses, which function as central hubs of male socialization in the neighborhood, and through informal conversations in small local shops. Because these environments are predominantly male spaces, the resulting gender distribution of participants reflects the gendered dynamics of public life in Ovaeymir: nine participants were men and three were women. Access to female participants was only possible through existing personal contacts; thus, the three women were interviewed in their homes after being introduced by acquaintances.

Several challenges emerged during recruitment. Due to the political sensitivity of Kurdish identity in Turkey, some residents expressed hesitation or distrust when approached for interviews. On occasion, I encountered accusations of being an "agent" or attempting to create trouble. Additionally, some potential interviewees were reluctant to speak openly in public settings, which further affected who could be included in the sample. Participants varied in their educational backgrounds. Four interviewees were university graduates or students—all of whom were born in Aydın—which may reflect intergenerational socioeconomic mobility. In contrast, five participants with actual migration experience reported having left school at the primary level, and only two migrant-background participants had completed high school.

Interviews followed a semi-structured, in-depth format. While I guided the conversation through a set of core questions, discussions frequently took on a conversational tone. When participants showed interest in elaborating on particular topics, I encouraged them to do so and avoided interrupting. All interviews lasted a minimum of 30 minutes, with many extending beyond this. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees.

Although more than twelve interviews were initially conducted, I excluded several that closely replicated each other in content. Once the twelve included interviews provided sufficient depth and variation, I determined that saturation had been reached, and no further recruitment was pursued.

3.3 Research Ethics, Personal Biases and Limitations

Given the political sensitivity surrounding Kurdish identity and migration in Turkey, the study adhered closely to ethical principles. Participants were fully informed of the aims of the research, assured of confidentiality, and given the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used, and potentially identifying details were removed to protect participants -particularly important given the risks associated with publicly expressing political or ethnic views in the Turkish context.

Although this study offers important insights into how Kurdish residents of Ovaeymir perceive and respond to Syrian newcomers, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings but clarify the analytical boundaries within which they should be interpreted.

First of all, qualitative research requires acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality (Lim, 2024). In this sense, my positionality as an insider - a Kurdish researcher with personal familiarity with the neighborhood - simultaneously facilitated and constrained the research process. While this position granted me unique access, trust, and cultural fluency, it may also have complicated the maintenance of analytical distance. Participants may have perceived me as "one of us," which could have encouraged openness in some cases but produced guarded or strategically shaped responses in others, particularly when discussing politically sensitive topics. Moreover, the existence of prior social ties in the neighborhood may have influenced both who agreed to participate and how freely they spoke. These dynamics introduce the possibility of confirmation bias and selective disclosure, both of which must be critically acknowledged.

Secondly, the study is based on twelve in-depth interviews. While this number is consistent with qualitative research emphasizing analytical richness rather than statistical representation, it inevitably limits the generalizability of the findings. Because the analysis draws on Jenkins's (2014) distinction between "groups" and "categories," applying these theoretical labels on the basis of twelve participants introduces interpretative constraints. Moreover, Ovaeymir represents a highly particular socio-spatial context: a low-income, Kurdish-majority neighborhood with a history of internal migration and more recent patterns of Syrian settlement. These characteristics make the field site analytically valuable but limit the transferability of findings. Kurdish communities in larger metropolitan centers (e.g., Istanbul), in majority-Kurdish regions (e.g., Diyarbakır), or in middle-class settings may relate to Syrian migrants in different ways. The study therefore illuminates a specific micro-context rather than offering claims about Kurdish attitudes in general.

Third, all interviews were conducted during a single fieldwork period in January 2025. Yet Syrian presence in Turkey spans more than a decade and has been shaped by shifting political discourses, economic crises, and evolving public sentiment. A cross-sectional design cannot fully capture how Kurdish attitudes may have changed throughout these phases. Although I asked participants to reflect on how their earlier views compared to their current perceptions, retrospective accounts cannot replace longitudinal observation. Thus, the study offers a snapshot rather than a temporal trajectory.

Fourth, access to female participants proved challenging due to the gendered structure of public life in the neighborhood. Tea houses—the primary sites of recruitment—are predominantly male spaces, and many local women do not frequent public cafés or commercial areas in ways that would facilitate casual recruitment. Consequently, nine of the twelve participants were men. While I was able to reach three women through personal contacts and conduct interviews in their homes, women's perspectives remain comparatively underrepresented. This limits the study's capacity to capture potential gendered differences in perceptions of Syrians.

Fifth, as mentioned above, Kurdish identity in Turkey constitutes a politically sensitive terrain. This atmosphere may have led some participants to moderate or censor their views, especially on topics related to ethnicity, state practices, or intergroup tensions. As such, some responses may reflect performative caution rather than fully articulated personal beliefs. Lastly, although the study explores attiudes and perceptions of Kurds toward Syrians, it does not include direct accounts from Syrians themselves. This means the analysis reflects only one side of an intergroup relationship.

CHAPTER 4. INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Figure 4.1. Word cloud based on all interview data (created by the author using MAXQDA, 2025)

Before analysing the interviews, it is helpful to look at the word cloud created from all participants' responses, as it provides an overall picture of the research. Within the Figure 4.1 above, the words that appear larger and bolder in the word cloud indicate those mentioned more frequently by participants. The most prominent words ; "go," "Syrian," and "Turkey" as can also be seen in the detailed analysis below, reflect participants' negative and exclusionary attitudes. The underlying triggers of these attitudes can be interpreted through words such as "culturally," "belong," "citizen/immigrant," "difference," "abandon," "die," "bad," "crime," and "rent."

Participants who hold exclusionary and negative perceptions tend to justify their stance through symbolic and boundaries drawn around the notion of "difference" between themselves and Syrians, as well as through categorization processes, perceptions of moral, economic, and cultural threat, and various stereotypes.

Conversely, words such as "similar," "kid," "friend," "help," "Muslim," and "human" reflect the positive perceptions and attitudes expressed by certain participants. In this context, boundary work functions on the basis of perceived similarity, as some participants soften the boundaries through supranational identification with Islam, transnational Kurdishness, and positive interpersonal contact with Syrians.

The meta-categories of "negative perceptions and attitudes" and "positive perceptions and attitudes" represent two opposing yet interrelated dimensions that emerged from the interviews. Regardless of their valence; be it positive or negative, inclusive or exclusive, the underlying *us/them* distinction and its evolving manifestations are rooted in participants' internal processes of identification. In this regard, the analysis conceptualizes Kurdish(group)ness as a key analytical category that encapsulates dynamics of internal identification and collective sense of belonging. Participants' self-identification, group identification, and attachment to both the land and Turkey play a pivotal role in shaping their orientations and the meanings they ascribe to intergroup relations.

4.1 KURDISH(GROUP)NESS

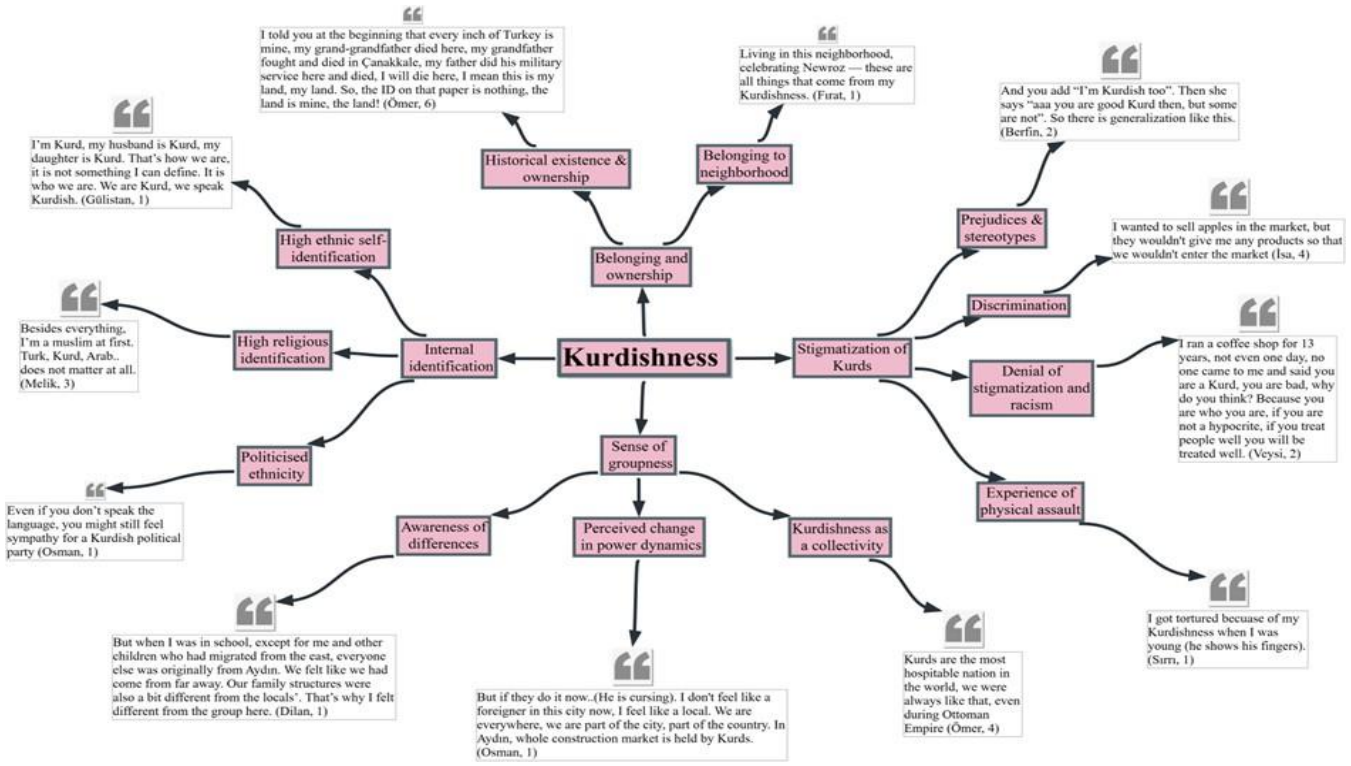

Figure 4.2. Code–theory model for Kurdish(group)ness meta-category (created by the author using MAXQDA, 2025)

4.1.1 Internal Identification

Although the degree of *salience* varied among participants, all interviewees clearly expressed identification with *Kurdishness*. When asked for self-identification, despite being externally defined as "Turkish" by the Turkish Constitution, they consistently asserted their Kurdish identity: *"I identify as Kurd. I am from Turkey, but I am a Kurd. I can't say I'm Turkish because the concept of 'Turkishness' has been misused a lot in this country." (Fırat)*, *"But I cannot be a Turk. The constitution cannot make me a Turk, only God can. And he made me a Kurd." (Ömer)*.

Those who explicitly embraced and took pride in their Kurdishness were coded as having high salience, whereas those who downplayed it or emphasized other identities were coded as low salience. Figure 4.3. below illustrates the levels of Kurdishness salience among the interviewees;

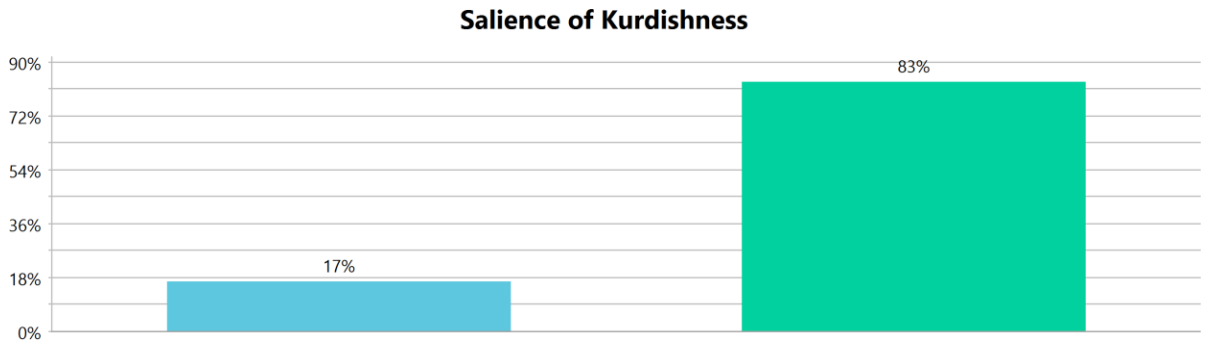

Figure 4.3. Salience of Kurdishness in the interviews (created by the author using MAXQDA, 2025)

However, this table does not imply that participants with high salience share a homogeneous sense of belonging, interpret Kurdishness uniformly, or narrate similar experiences. On the contrary, their accounts reveal a spectrum of meanings and emotional investments attached to Kurdishness. For Kurds born in Aydın, who have no migration experience and speak no Kurdish or only partially, Kurdishness is constructed through an awareness of difference*: "I was born and raised here, but I grew up knowing that my family had migrated here, that they spoke a different language"(Ali)*, and through cultural appropriation, such as language: "*For example, Kurdish was spoken around me — I remember it from my childhood. Between my father and grandmother, between my mother and father. Outside, at school, people spoke Turkish, and I spoke Turkish too, but the language spoken at home was Kurdish. That's how I first realized it." (Dilan)* and through cultural practices such as celebrating Newroz or joining Kurdish dances: *"Seeing a wedding in the neighborhood and people dancing the halay makes me feel Kurdish." (Fırat)*

For older participants with migration experience, Kurdishness is more frequently described as inherited: *"What makes me Kurdish is that when I was born, my mother spoke to me in Kurdish… I inherited Kurdish customs and traditions from my mother." (Berfin)* or as historical rootedness and genealogical lineage: *"What makes me*

Kurd is my language, my culture, our dances, our food, and our existence on this land with this culture for thousands of years. And I was born into this reality." (Ömer).

By invoking their fathers, grandfathers, and even great-grandfathers, these participants anchor their identity in a collective past:

"I define myself as a Kurd and Muslim. I'm not racist, but it does not mean I can deny my roots. We are Kurds, my grandfathers were Kurds, they took part in the War of Independence as Kurds." (İsa)

These ancestral references transform Kurdishness into a form of moral inheritance — a thread connecting generations, territory, and culture.

As seen in İsa's statement, three interviewees also expressed strong religious identification. Veysi stated: *"I'm a Kurd, but first I am Muslim. Races are not important. Allah says that we created you in tribes so that you can know each other. I speak Kurdish, he speaks Turkish—it's not a big deal. Muslimhood matters.(Veysi)***.** Similarly, Melik said**:** *"I'm Muslim first, then Kurd." (Melik)*

4.1.2 Stigmatization of Kurds

To better understand whether participants related their own experiences to those of Syrians, I asked them about the prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion they had personally faced. Almost all interviewees reported experiencing Kurdishness as a stigmatized identity. However, while those who grew up in Aydın, had no migration experience, spoke Turkish more properly, and possessed higher levels of education mentioned also prejudice and stereotyping, yet their experiences were less extreme than those of who had migrated and spoke Turkish with a heavier accent. As shown in the Figure 4.4 below, experiences such as physical assault *("I got tortured because of my Kurdishness when I was young… These hands carry that story… What makes me Kurd is my life, my roots, my resistance." – Sırrı)*, discrimination *("At first I felt like an immigrant in this city… There was racism. They didn't even hire us." – İsa)*, and dehumanization *("When I first migrated here (1974), I was a normal person, but the people here did not consider me human—they called me 'Kurd*

with a tail.'" –Ömer) were narrated exclusively by those with migration experience;

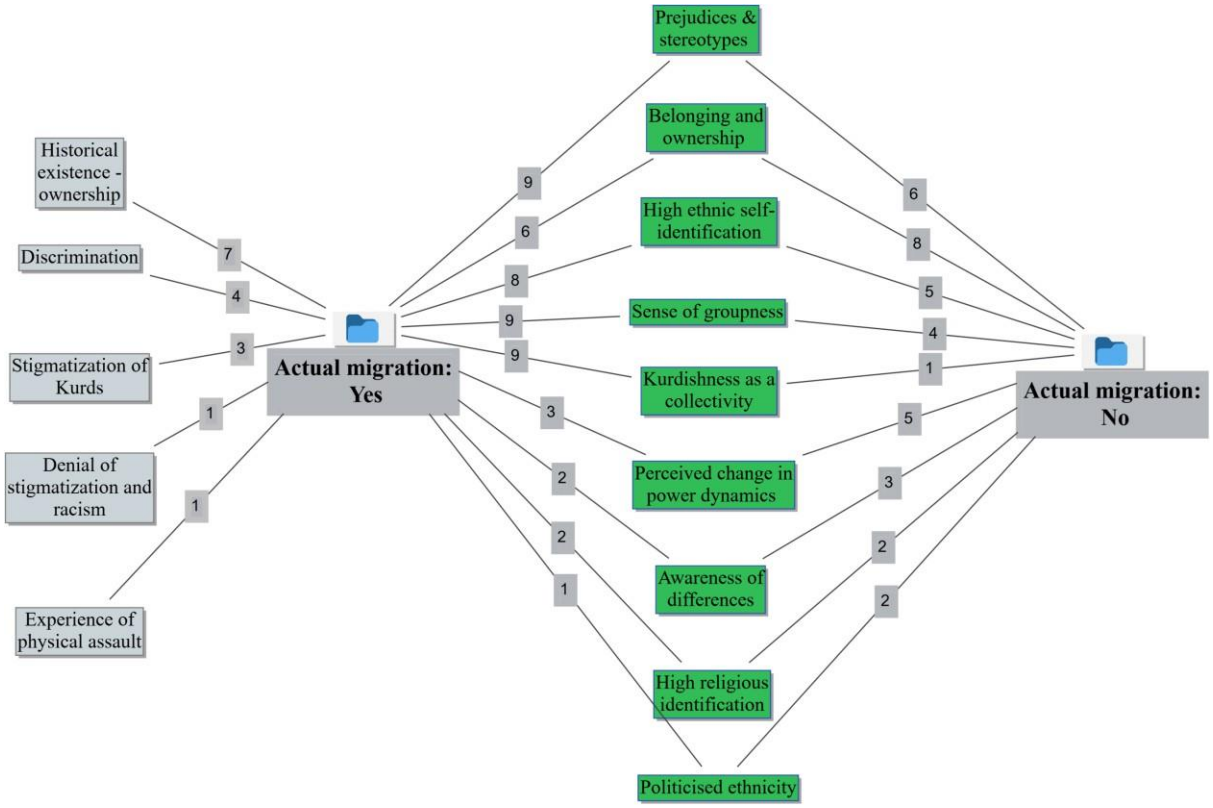

Figure 4.4. Document sets comparison in relation to codes (created by the author using MAXQDA, 2025)

While many participants acknowledged the persistence of minority stigma, they also emphasized that it has weakened over time, indicating shifting power dynamics within the social field. For instance, this transformation is evident in İsa's account: *"Racism still exists, but it is different than before. When we first arrived, our neighbor would tell others that a Kurd had come and caused trouble for us. But no one can say that to me now. The reason is that we have more power—both in population and economically. Power beats everything else." (İsa)*

This perception of changing power relations also appears in Melik's reflection, where he links it to the arrival of Syrians: *"Kurds were once second-class citizens, but the arrival of Syrians has made us more valuable in the eyes of Turks. Kurds are more accepted now, not because we are more loved, but because we are the majority here. Power beats love. We have power now; Syrians don't." (Melik)*

This dynamic can be interpreted through Elias's understanding of power as relational and fluid. Complementary studies building on his "established–outsider" figuration (see Hogenstijn, van Middelkoop, & Terlouw, 2008, Lever & Milbourne, 2014) demonstrate that shifting balances of power can blur or even dissolve these figurations over time.

However, as can be seen in Figure 4.4, not all interviewees who has actual migration shared experiences of stigmatization. Veysi, by recounting his positive experiences as a migrant and shopkeeper, rejected the stigmatization of Kurds. Having run a coffee shop for thirteen years without discrimination based on his Kurdish identity, he emphasized moral conduct and mutual respect over ethnic boundaries:

"I migrated here, I treated people nicely… I had a coffee shop for 13 years, and not once did anyone say, 'You are a Kurd, you are bad.' Why? Because if you are not a hypocrite and treat people well, you will be treated well." (Veysi)

Furthermore, In contrast, Ercan reflected what Goffman (1963) defines as internalized stigma; *"All of the ignorance is here, in this neighborhood… We Kurds still have a bit of that Middle Eastern culture in us. Honestly, I get why people in Aydın complain sometimes—they're not totally wrong. Turks became literate earlier than us; they're kind of more modern in that sense." (Ercan)*

4.1.3 Sense of Groupness

Throughout the interviews, one striking observation was that, beyond individual experiences, participants frequently articulated a sense of *"we-ness,"* depicting a clear *sense of groupness*. For example:

"Now I feel more like I belong, even if I'm still not fully accepted by some people. But I don't care. Here there are many of our people. I do not feel like a stranger here." (Gülistan).

Her reference to *"our people"* when reflecting on changes in her sense of belonging since migration exemplifies this collective orientation.

A similar sentiment can be found in Osman's narrative: *"There were times when I felt like 'the other'; there were prejudices—it happened to all of us, didn't it happen to you? They used to make fun of me. But if they did that*

now… (he curses). I don't feel like a foreigner in this city anymore. I feel like a local. We are everywhere; we are part of the city, part of the country." (Osman)

This can be interpreted through Jenkins's (2008, 2014) argument that ethnic identities are often reinforced in reaction to external categorization. In this sense, experiences of stigmatization and exclusion did not erode participants' sense of belonging; rather, they appear to have strengthened their collective identification. Kurdish *groupness* thus emerges as a resilient, self-defined collective identity that resists external categorization—whether imposed by the state (as "Turkish") or by wider society (through stigmatization).

This sense of groupness was also reflected when participants were asked why Syrians had predominantly settled in their neighborhoods:

"Many, many settled here because we treat them more tolerantly." (Sırrı)

"Look, my son, you say they have settled in this neighborhood. Kurds are the most hospitable nation in the world; we have always been like that, even during the Ottoman Empire, when we had our autonomous Kurdistan region. No other race in the world is as hospitable as Kurds. They are in this neighborhood because we are hospitable." (Ömer)

Ömer's historical reference reflects a broader pattern of *historical rootedness* that recurred throughout the interviews. However, it would be reductive to interpret participants' collective identification as solely ethnic. While they assert and maintain their cultural distinctiveness, they also express a strong sense of belonging and ownership toward Turkey. This should not be conflated with classical national identity; rather, it represents a complex layering of ethnic identification grounded in historical existence and rootedness, yet instrumentalized through citizenship. This dynamic becomes even more apparent in the following section on *Belonging and Ownership*.

4.1.4 Belonging and Ownership

As mentioned above, a salient feature across interviewees' narratives is their strong sense of attachment and ownership toward Turkey. Their sense of belonging reflects the overlapping of multiple identifications—a combination of ethnic identity, nativity (historical rootedness in place), and institutional membership (citizenship)—through which they articulate a sense of entitlement to both the land and the

Republic. In this way, participants embody what Verkuyten and Martinovic (2017) describe as *collective ownership*: the belief that a social group has a moral and historical claim over a territory and its institutions. This perspective is vividly expressed in Ömer's narrative;

"*Look, it is not written as 'Republic of the Turk', it says Republic of Türkiye, which means, if the people live in these lands since the foundation of the republic, if their grandfathers have been living in these lands for seven generations, the republic belongs to them. But I cannot be a Turk, the constitution cannot make me a Turk, only God can. And he made me a Kurd." (Ömer)*

Ömer's rejection of constitutional *Turkishness* should not be read as a refusal of belonging to Turkey; rather, it constitutes a claim to collective ownership of the republic as citizens who have historically contributed to its existence. Similarly, İsa's account demonstrates the moral dimension of this ownership, linking Kurdish identity to historical participation in the making of the republic:

"We are Kurds, my grandfathers were Kurds; they took part in the War of Independence as Kurds." (İsa)

Berfin, in turn, grounds her sense of belonging in both ancestry and citizenship:

"Even though some Turks do not accept us, I do not feel like an immigrant at all as a Kurd, because my grandfathers have been the people of these lands for seven generations. So, I'm a person of these lands… we are also citizens of this country." (Berfin)

In sum, the interviewees articulate a collective social identity (Jenkins, 2008) through the interplay of *internal identification* and *external categorization*, mediated by overlapping layers of moral, historical, and institutional belonging. Their identification with Turkey does not stem from classical nationalist pride but from a claim to rightful inclusion grounded in ancestry, sacrifice, and historical continuity (see; Gans, 2001). In asserting that long-term presence on the land legitimizes one's belonging, participants construct Kurdishness not in opposition to the republic, but as an integral, co-constitutive part of it.

4.2 POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

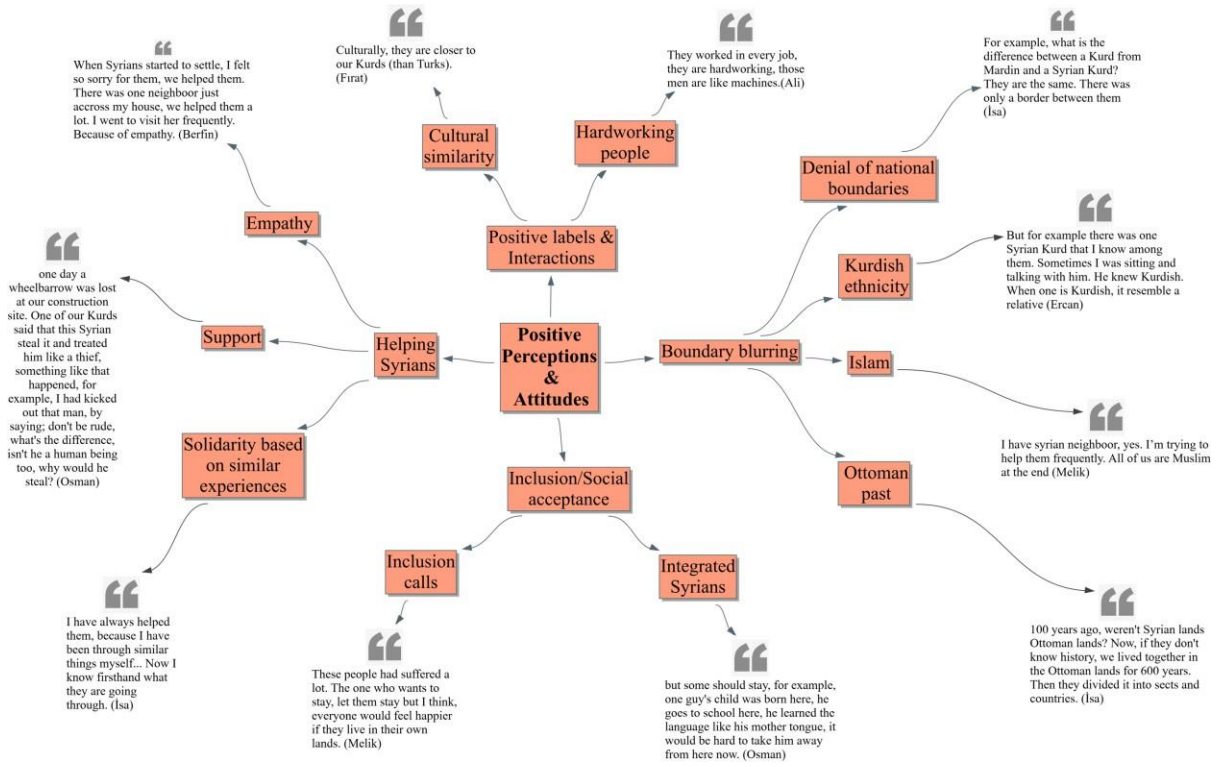

Figure 4.5. Code–theory model for Positive Perceptions and Attitudes meta-category (created by the author using MAXQDA, 2025)

Figure 4.6 below illustrates the coding graph of"Positive Perception and Attitudes" in relation to the participants. According to the graph, there is considerable variation among the twelve participants. The highest frequency values belong to İsa and Melik, who are the only participants consistently reflecting pro-Syrian perceptions and attitudes. At the opposite end, Sırrı and Veysi recorded no instances within this category. The remaining eight participants appear at lower frequency levels, which can be attributed to their initial humanitarian and emotional assistance provided during the early phase of Syrian migration, as well as occasional positive reactions that emerged in context-dependent situations. Among these, Osman and Fırat display relatively higher levels compared to the others, primarily due to their direct contact experiences with Syrians

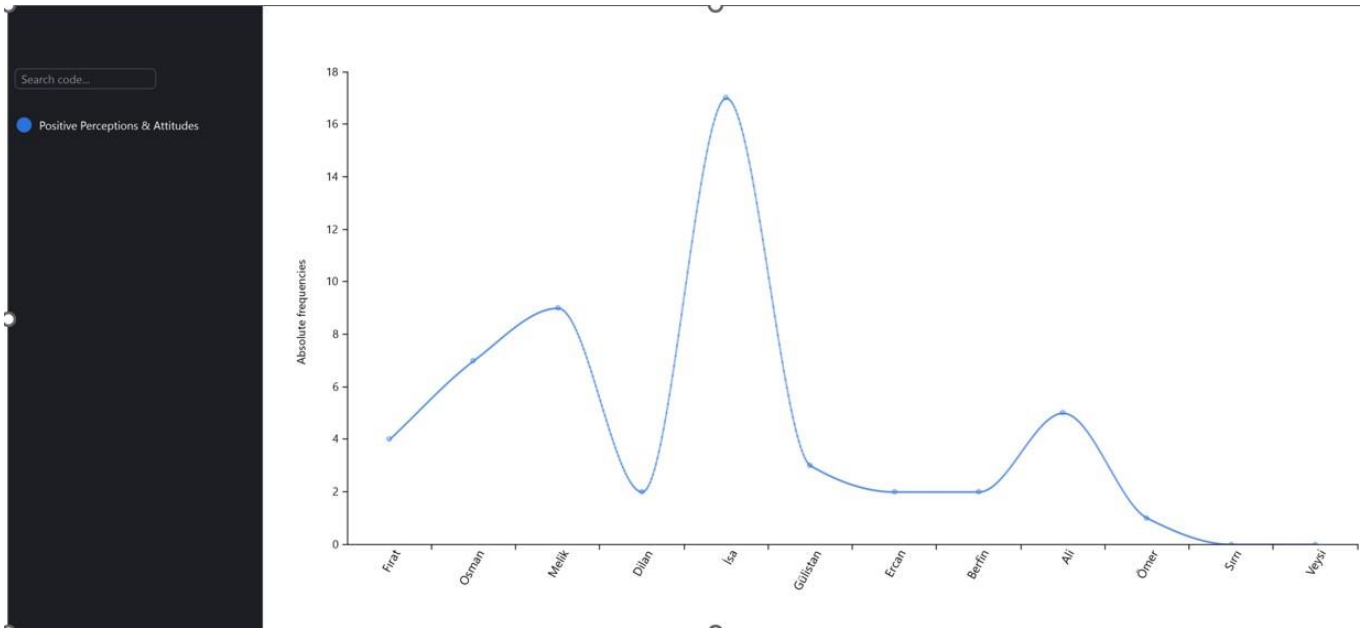

Figure 4.6. Code–participant matrix for the Positive Perceptions and Attitudes meta-category

Therefore, while the "Positive Perception and Attitudes" appears across nearly all participants in the graph, this representation should not be interpreted as an indication of overall positivity. Rather, except İsa and Melik, the graph reflects temporary and situational positivity linked to early humanitarian responses and context-specific evaluations of Syrians, rather than sustained positive perceptions.

4.2.1 Helping Syrians

As noted above, almost all participants reported engaging in helping initiatives during the early settlement period of Syrians in their neighborhoods. These initiatives primarily involved offering material or emotional support, motivated by shared humanity, shared religious affiliation, or shared migration experiences. Some participants who generally hold negative perceptions and attitudes reported that, at the time of the initial refugee influx, they did not harbor any negative opinions or feelings. For instance, Dilan—whose negative perceptions will be discussed later—described her feelings as follows:

"I was 15 or 16 when the refugee flow started. I did not have any negative opinion or feeling. When I saw them on the streets or in the parks, I felt deeply sorry. I did not have any personal connection with them. I remember my family tried to help some Syrian families in our neighborhood." (Dilan)

A similar perspective is reflected in Osman's statements:

"Honestly, I never thought there would be such problems when the Syrians first arrived. I thought more moderately, I felt sorry for them. We gave food and clothes to those staying in tents. We gave them meat on the Feast of Sacrifice. We had many people working for us." (Osman)

Indeed, interviewees' accounts indicate general sense of assistance and solidarity emerged when Syrians began settling in their neighborhoods. Some interviewees framed these helping efforts in terms of shared humanity. For example, Ömer stated:

"When they first started to settle here, I even distributed the dowry I had bought for my daughter. I informed my friends, bought a refrigerator for some, a washing machine for others, and a sofa set for others. I collected and delivered these items to help them. After all, we are all human; they are human too." (Ömer)

Ömer's statements reflects empirical evidence supporting the positive role of shared humanity in promoting helping behaviors (see Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018, p. 236).

Moreover, some interviewees related their support and assistance practices to their own migration experiences. For instance, İsa explicitly relates his personal migration background when discussing the help he provides to Syrian immigrants in his neighborhood: *"I have always helped them, because I have been through similar things myself... Now I know firsthand what they are going through" (İsa).*

Similarly, Melik relates his assistance to a Syrian neighbor to his own experiences, additionally invoking religious solidarity: *"I have a Syrian neighbor, yes. I'm trying to help them frequently. All of us are muslim in the end. And we had gone through similar processes. The one who sleeps full while his neighbor is hungry is not from us, right? Actually, the other day I found a washing machine and I gave it to a Syrian friend without expecting anything in return" (Melik).*

The interviewees' tendency to relate their actions to their own migration experiences aligns with previous researchs, which indicate that familiarity with immigration can positively influence attitudes toward immigrants by fostering extended empathy and solidarity (see Just & Anderson, 2015, Sirin et al., 2017). In addition, Cortland et al. (2017) have shown that experiences of stigmatization and disadvantaged group positions can lead to the development of solidarity. This is illustrated in the case of Osman, a construction

company owner, who demonstrated both emotional and behavioral solidarity toward a Syrian worker following a prejudiced reaction by a Kurdish employee whom he referred to as "our Kurd": *"...one day a wheelbarrow was lost at our construction site. One of our Kurds said that this Syrian stole it and treated him like a thief, something like that happened, for example, I had kicked out that man, by saying; don't be rude, what's the difference, isn't he a human being too, why would he steal? (Osman)"*

4.2.2 Positive Interactions and Labeling

Positive interactions and labeling are closely related to intergroup contact. Literature demonstrates that intergroup contact can play a significant role in fostering positive relationships and reducing prejudice (see Hewstone, 2015, Allport, 1954). While the interviewees' accounts do not provide conclusive evidence that contact automatically resulted in positive relationships between groups, it is noteworthy that even participants who generally expressed negative perceptions and attitudes occasionally framed their experiences with Syrians in positive terms and engaged in favorable labeling. Such patterns are not coincidental but rather suggest that direct interaction and contact may facilitate more positive evaluations. For instance, Ali, reflecting on his experience working with Syrians, describes them in highly positive terms, even portraying them almost as "superhuman" in their work ethic:

"They worked in every job, they are hardworking, those men are like machines. We were working as a team of eight people, in the parquet business. We as eight people were laying 500 meters, while four Syrians were laying 1000 meters." (Ali)

The term "hardworking" in Ali's account constitutes an example of positive labeling. Other interviewees similarly emphasized Syrians' work performance. For example, Osman highlights Syrians' diligence while explicitly rejecting the common notion that they "steal our jobs," thereby countering economic threat narratives:

"We had many people working for us. They work well, we pay the same money. We have a fixed wage. There is no reality to the talk that they took our jobs, since Turks don't work in the construction sector anyway, so there was no such competition." (Osman)

Similarly, Melik describes Syrians as "hardworking" and also praises their religiosity and respect for traditional marriage practices:

"I am satisfied with this situation, I have no problems with them. They are very hardworking people, culturally they are different from us but in a good way. They are very religious, which is a very good thing. For example, they set great store by marriage." (Melik)

Even Fırat, who generally holds negative views about Syrians, reports positive interactions with Syrian workers and highlights cultural proximity:

"We had many Syrian workers with us, at the construction site. We got along well. We were teaching each other the language. Culturally, they are closer to our Kurds (than Turks)." (Fırat)

These narratives illustrate how direct contact and cooperative interaction can foster positive labeling and more favorable perceptions, even among participants who generally hold negative attitudes.

4.2.3 Boundary Blurring

Boundary blurring functions here as a symbolic mechanism that can, at times, lead to a sense of inclusion when the "us/them" distinction is softened through cultural repertoires (Lamont et. al, 2016) based on shared historical legacy and transnational or supranational identities. According to Wimmer (2008), non-ethnic principles and identification with transnational or supranational identities—such as Islam, the Communist International, or Buddhism—may be promoted to overcome national, racial, or ethnic boundaries.

"When they first migrated, we tried to help. And then, it is just merhaba merhaba. But for example there was one Syrian Kurd that I know among them. Sometimes I was sitting and talking with him. He knew Kurdish. When one is Kurdish, it resembles a relative." (Ercan)

Ercan, perhaps the interviewee expressing the most negative beliefs and feelings toward Syrians, describes a general social distance between himself and Syrian immigrants. However, he highlights his interaction with the Syrian Kurd, noting that shared transnational ethnic identity motivates this engagement. The fact that he converses and spends time with him specifically because they are both Kurdish suggests that transnational Kurdish identity, can play a significant role in softening "us/them" distinctions.

Although he demonstrates inclusionary attitudes toward Syrian immigrants in general regardless of ethnicity, Kurdishness is also evident in İsa's statement:

"Arabs came, Kurds came, there is no distinction for me, but I naturally have more sympathy for Syrian Kurds." (İsa)

This aligns with Duman's (2023) study on Kurds and Syrians in provinces with dense Kurdish populations, which indicates that some resident Kurds felt empathy toward newcomers due to shared Kurdish identity. In his subsequent statements, İsa also invokes a shared historical and civilizational legacy. When asked about internal and external migration in relation to Kurdish and Syrian migrants in Aydın, he emphasized:

"Syrians are also internal migration. 100 years ago, weren't Syrian lands Ottoman lands? Now, if they don't know history, we lived together in the Ottoman lands for 600 years. Then they divided it into sects and countries." (İsa)

This perspective resonates with historical accounts of the Ottoman Empire, in which the "Millet" system treated Muslims as members of the ummah regardless of ethnic background (Kaya, 2016). Isa further denies the salience of national borders:

"For example, what is the difference between a Kurd from Mardin and a Syrian Kurd? They are the same. There was only a border between them." (İsa)

4.2.4 Inclusion and Social Acceptance

It is important to note that only two interviewees, İsa and Melik, explicitly expressed inclusive attitudes and a willingness to coexist with Syrians. The remaining ten participants, despite varying degrees of empathy or contact, ultimately stated that they preferred Syrians to return to their homeland. When asked directly whether Syrians should stay or leave, İsa responded: *"Those who want to go should go, but those who want to stay should stay" (İsa)*, while Melik emphasized the suffering Syrians had endured: *"These people have suffered a lot. The one who wants to stay, let them stay" (Melik).*

As discussed above, their inclusive orientations were largely informed by Islamic values,but also references to the Ottoman past, shared experiences of migration and positive contact.

When asked about their self-identifications, both participants defined themselves through a combination of Kurdishness and Islam—though Melik placed Islam before his ethnic identity: *"I'm Muslim first, then Kurd" (Melik).* This finding resonates with previous research suggesting that individuals embedded in religious "communities" or affiliated with religious organizations tend to display higher levels of institutional trust, greater political efficacy, and lower anti-immigrant sentiments (Boomgaarden & Freire, 2009). In this regard, the explicitly inclusionary positions of these two religious participants are consistent with earlier studies linking religiosity and pro-immigrant attitudes.

However, several other interviewees displayed selective or conditional forms of inclusion, rather than a full endorsement of coexistence. Such attitudes were particularly evident toward Syrian children who were perceived as successfully integrated into Turkish society—those who spoke fluent Turkish, attended local schools, or adopted elements of Turkish popular culture. Osman, for instance, remarked: *"...but some should stay. For example, one man's child was born here, goes to school here, and learned the language like his mother tongue. It would be hard to take him away from here now." (Osman)*

Similarly, Gülistan, who had previously expressed predominantly negative views, momentarily questioned her own exclusionary stance when referring to a Syrian child playing near her home:

"This child, for instance, was born and raised here; he speaks Turkish just like you. Look, he's even wearing Fenerbahçe slippers. It's a difficult situation, so my opinions keep changing about this." (Gülistan)

These examples indicate that integration-based familiarity, particularly through language acquisition and popular culture markers, can evoke emotional reconsideration and soften exclusionary attitudes, even among those who initially favor the return of Syrians.

4.3 NEGATIVE PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDES

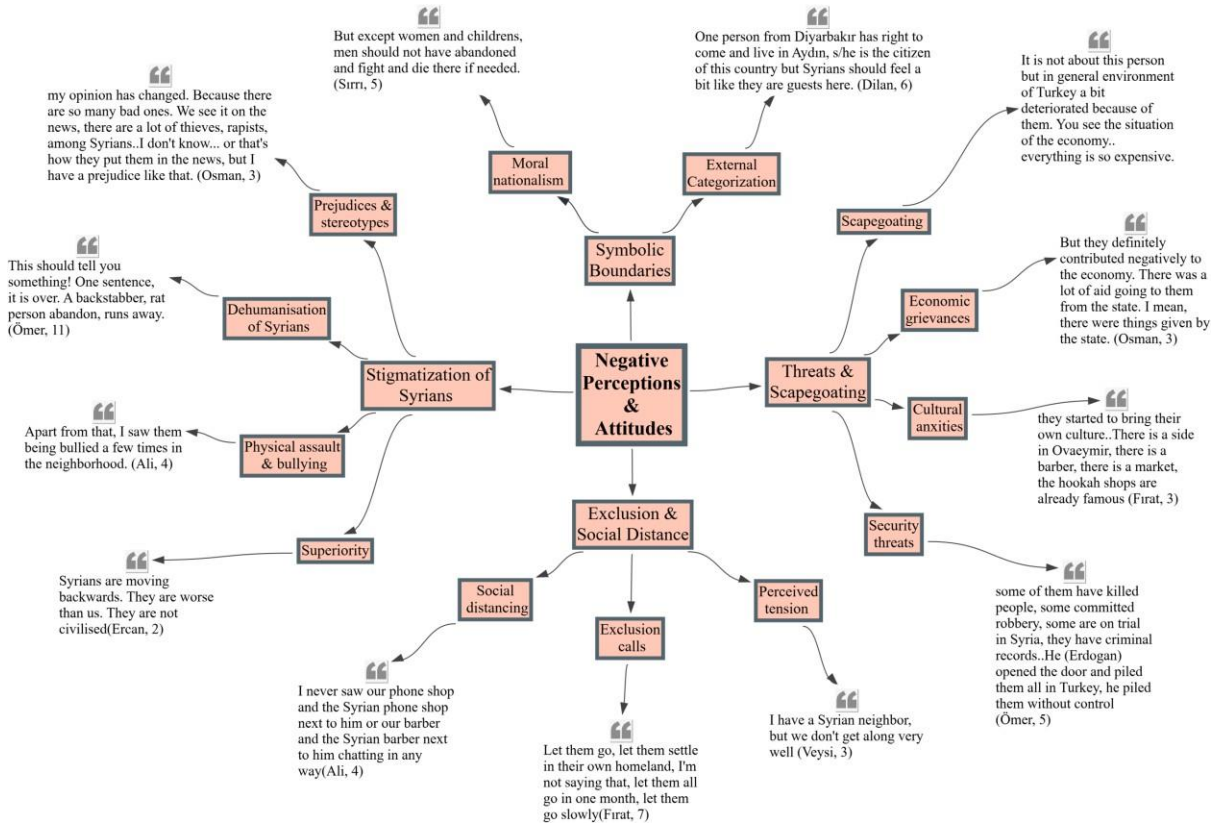

Fıgure 4.7 Code–theory model for Negative Perceptions and Attitudes meta-category (created by the author using MAXQDA, 2025)

4.3.1 Exclusion and Social Distance

Similar to previous research findings in Turkey (Erdoğan, 2020, Şar & Kuru, 2020) all the interviewees - except two- expressed a desire for Syrians to leave and maintained a clear social distance, showing little willingness to establish contact with them. The underlying motivations behind this exclusion and social distancing will be analyzed in the following section.

Figure 4.8. Co-occurrence model (created by the author using MAXQDA, 2025)

Figure 4.8 displays the relationships among codes within the negative perceptions and attitudes. The expressions in which interviewees explicitly articulated a desire for Syrians to return to their home country were coded as "exclusion calls," while statements reflecting unwillingness to engage or establish contact with them were coded as "social distancing."

As illustrated in Figure 4.8, a significant overlap of the symbolic boundaries - where interviewees externally categorize Syrians and draw clear us/them distinctions - with both the exclusion and social distance subcategories, highlights their underlying motivation.

Moreover, as can be seen in the same chart, these subcategories also overlap with *Stigmatization of Syrians*, where the external categorization of *them* is constructed and represented in a distinctly pejorative and inferior manner, and with *Threats & Scapegoating*, where Syrians are portrayed as a homogeneous source of threat and the primary cause of all adverse social phenomena.

"Let them go, let them settle in their own homeland, I'm not saying that, let them all go in one month, let them go slowly. Because when there is an incident, when a Syrian does something to a Kurd or a Turk, even when there is a fight, it is difficult. You say that a man from another country comes here and stabs us, kills us, fights with us. And then you say if you are so brave, then why you did not fight in your land."(Fırat)

When examining Fırat's statement, it becomes evident that his justification for the exclusion of Syrians is immediately framed through an assumption of conflict and tension which is connected with perception of security threats. Furthermore, phrases such as *"their own homeland," "a man from another country,"* and *"when a Syrian does something to a Kurd or a Turk"* clearly illustrate the symbolic boundaries he constructs between *us* and *them*.

What is particularly significant here is that, in the section on Kurdishness, Fırat, during his self-identification (*"I identify as a Kurd. I am from Turkey, but I am a Kurd. I can't say I'm Turkish because the concept of 'Turkishness' has been misused a lot in this country"*) drew a boundary between Kurdishness and Turkishness. However, in this instance, he places a Turk and a Kurd within the same category while othering Syrians, providing a clear illustration of Jenkins' (2008) argument that *"A and B may be different from each other at one level, but both are members of the meta-category C"* (Jenkins, 2014, p.6). Furthermore, the expression *"why didn't you fight in your own land"* reflects a form of moral nationalism, in which Syrians are perceived as morally inferior for having left their country instead of fighting for it.

"Our relationship as neighbors continued in the same way, but lately we stopped visiting each other because of her. She stopped. It is not about this person, but in general, the environment in Turkey has deteriorated a bit because of them. You see the economic situation—everything is so expensive. If conditions were safe, I think it would be better if they went back. Everyone is unemployed here." (Berfin). In Berfin's account, while she describes a declining relationship with her Syrian neighbor and attributes the distancing to the neighbor's behavior, she quickly extends her reasoning to a broader narrative that blames Syrians for Turkey's overall social and economic deterioration. This exemplifies how exclusion is intertwined with us/them boundaries, as well as the threat and scapegoating discourse, where *them* are collectively held responsible for societal problems.

4.3.2 Symbolic Boundaries

Symbolic boundaries refer to perceptions of similarity and difference, affinity and aversion, as well as inferiority and superiority between individuals and groups (Lamont, et al. 2016). Complementing this, based on these similarities and differences, individuals and groups externally categorize others (Jenkins, 2008). Indeed, several interviewees, while categorizing "them" (Syrians) within the us/them distinction, relied on different dimensions. In his theory of social identity, Jenkins(2014) emphasizes the overlap of various sources of identification, each with its own potential for inclusion and exclusion. For instance, one interviewee made a distinction between Syrians and their own compatriots in the context of citizenship: *"Oh, what does our state do? It turns its back on its own citizens; it gives to immigrants so that they can get five cents from Europe."* (Ömer).

Similarly, Dilan categorizes Syrians as "guests," drawing a distinction based on citizenship and belonging: *"One person from Diyarbakır has the right to come and live in Aydın, s/he is a citizen of this country; but Syrians should feel a bit like they are guests here."* (Dilan)

Fırat, on the other hand, constructs the us/them boundary through ethnicity: *"What I feel is that the privilege that has been denied to us for years has suddenly been given to them, and this offends me. For example, I have never seen a sign in Kurdish in Aydın, but those men just put up a sign in their own language. Why is it so easy for them, and why can't we do the same? And that is what bothers me, frankly."* (Fırat). At the same time, Fırat's statements exemplify what literature terms as *competitive victimhood* -typically observed among minority groups-, which is the tendency to perceive one's group as having suffered more relative to an outgroup (see Young & Sullivan, 2016).

Moreover, Berfin constructs the us/them boundary by linking ethnicity and nativity, invoking sacrifice for the homeland: *"Kurds are not like them. Even though some Turks do not accept us, I do not feel like an immigrant at all as a Kurd, because my grandfathers have been people of these lands for seven generations.*

So I am people of this land… But in the case of Syrians, it is not like that. Kurds fought for this country too." (Berfin)

Thus, she argues that Kurds should not be compared to Syrians. Implicitly, Berfin draws upon the same repertoire of moral nationalism that other interviewees employ both when articulating their self-identification and sense of belonging to Turkey, and when externally categorizing Syrians.

"Oh, but there is something like this: you may die, but you should never abandon your land. You may die, but you must not leave it. That's how it is, and it depends on faith. Today, so many young people have flocked to Turkey; they are all 20, 25 years old. Instead of running away, they should have stayed and died. I would die for my land!" (Ömer)

This shared repertoire of moral nationalism - an act interpreted as one's betrayal toward their nation (see Thomson, 2020) – becomes crucial marker of *us/them* distinctions that interviewees draw, based on symbolic difference. As Berfin expressed:

"Culturally they are a bit different from us. I ask myself, 'Why did they not defend their homeland and instead flee here?'" (Berfin). Such statements indicate how Syrians are categorized as morally deficient for having *fled* rather than *stayed to fight* for their country.

At the same time, this form of moral nationalism is particularly imposed on men as a moral duty. Men are regarded as noble heroes and defenders of the nation, while women and children are perceived as vulnerable and in need of protection. For example, Fırat contrasts women and children with adult men, arguing that except for women and children, men ought to have stayed and fought:

"I was sad then, but as time passed, in the last four or five years, I said to myself, why didn't they fight, why did they flee, why did they abandon their homeland? Let the women and children leave and take refuge in Turkey. Turkey can take care of them..but the others should fight there, fight for their land. I started to look at it from that point of view." (Fırat)

Similarly, Sırrı expresses the same perspective:

"But except for women and children, men should not have left; they should have stayed, fought, and died there if necessary." (Sırrı)

It is not coincidental that in the section on Kurdishness, interviewees expressed their sense of *groupness*, *belonging*, and *ownership* through a similar moral repertoire, while simultaneously invoking moral nationalism when categorizing Syrians. This suggests that moral nationalism functions as a key element of the interviewees' cultural repertoire, shaping both their internal definitions of belonging and their external categorization of others.

4.3.3 Stigmatization of Syrians

According to Jenkins (2008), external categorization is most often pejorative, negative, or stigmatizing in its content. Complementing Jenkins' perspective, Lamont emphasizes that categorization constitutes a central component of stigmatization and racialization processes(Lamont, et al. 2016). This dynamic was clearly observed in this study. This section focuses on the interviewees' external categorization of *"them"* - Syrians - within the *us/them* distinction, depicting them in a pejorative manner grounded in prejudice and stereotyes.

An interesting point emerges when examining the case of Ömer, who, in the *Kurdishness* category, described being dehumanized himself: "*When I first migrated here (1974), I was a normal person, but the people here (local Turks) did not consider me a human being—they called me a Kurd with a tail." (Ömer)*

Yet, the same interviewee resorts to dehumanizing rhetoric when speaking about Syrians (see Haslam, 2006);

"And be sure that the time will come, they will clash with you here—maybe my son or my grandson will see it. I swear it will happen. We don't know who is what, but those who love their country do not abandon it! This should tell you something. One sentence, and it's over: a backstabber, a rat leaves and runs away." (Ömer)

In Ömer's discourse, Syrians are represented as morally corrupt, untrustworthy, and threatening, precisely because they did not fight for their homeland. He implies their "moral deficient" and connects it with a perceived sense of future conflict.

This pattern is echoed across other interviews. For instance, Veysi, who strongly emphasizes his *Muslim identity* in his self-identification and rejects ethnic distinctions, nevertheless he uses expressions historically employed to stigmatize Kurds, when speaking about Syrians:

"They are different from us culturally; there is no cleanliness, absolutely no cleanliness. They are greedy, they never say no to whatever you give them." (Veysi)

A similar attitude appears in Ercan's account. Terms such as backward and uncivilized have historically been used to stigmatize Kurds (see Saracoğlu, 2011). Ercan acknowledges this, stating that "we were once like that*,"* yet proceeds to construct a comparative hierarchy between in-group and out-group, positioning Syrians as culturally inferior:

"When we Kurds first came here, we weren't really welcomed, but we're getting better as a society. Syrians are moving backwards. They are worse than us. They are not civilized. You should try to adapt to the society you migrate to, but they are not trying. They are careless. We were like Syrians too, but they are more backward than us, culturally. There is no culture, no civilization. You must adapt to the society you migrate to—that's civilization, and they don't have that." (Ercan)

Previous research (Brewer et al., 1993) demonstrates that individuals often engage in social comparison processes between in-groups and out-groups, developing favorable biases toward their own group while employing coping strategies that may lead to internalized stigmatization, as same mechanism is clearly reflected in Ercan's narrative.

Another interviewee, Osman, illustrates how stigmatization intersects with media discourse, which will also be discussed in the section on *Threats and Scapegoating*:

"When I look from the first time they came to today, my opinion has changed. Because there are so many bad ones. We see it on the news—there are a lot of thieves, rapists among Syrians... I don't know, maybe that's how they show them on TV, but I have a prejudice like that." (Osman)

Osman's account portrays Syrians as a homogeneous criminalized group, attributing deviant behaviors such as theft and sexual violence to them collectively.

By acknowledging that these perceptions are mediated through the news, his statement exemplifies the role of media in shaping and reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices toward Syrians in Turkey (see Güvengez et al., 2020).

4.3.4 Threats & Scapegoating

Most of the interviewees in this study portrayed Syrians as a homogeneous source of threat. Perceived threats manifested themselves through cultural anxieties, economic grievances, security concerns, and scapegoating narratives.

Consistent with previous research conducted in the Turkish context (see Konda, 2016, Saracoglu & Belanger, 2019), the interviewees frequently accused Syrians of lowering wages, increasing rent prices, and exploiting public resources. This dynamic is particularly evident in the account of a seasonal farmworker, who, when asked about her reasons for maintaining social distance from her Syrian neighbors, explained:

"Well, everything is on the table, as you can see. Could it be the conditions of life? Could it be because of these high prices? For instance, we go to the farm to work for 500 TL, they are working for 300 TL. Of course, they work for lower wages, and this decreases the overall wages. And when we go to the bazaar, we see that prices are going up—everything has doubled." (Gülistan)

When considered alongside Turkey's economic decline since 2015, this perception resonates with Riek et al.'s (2006) argument that under conditions of economic hardship and socio-political tension, individuals tend to perceive outgroup members—such as immigrants and minorities—as responsible for social and economic threats.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the media plays a significant role in reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. Since the arrival of Syrians, Turkish media outlets have produced hundreds of pieces of misinformation and fabricated news stories (see Refugee Association, 2020). Some interviewees repeated the very myths

and false claims that have been widely circulated on social media, thereby reproducing threat and scapegoating discourses. For instance, Ercan, referencing one of the most common economic scapegoating tropes, emphasized issues of taxation and market competition:

"I'm a barber. Look, this Syrian opened a barber shop across from me. I don't know if he pays taxes, but I do. He shaves cheaper than me. They have destroyed the market." (Ercan)

Similarly, Dilan reproduced another widely shared stereotype related to unfair advantages in higher education: *"They get places in universities like a snap. They get in very easily." (Dilan)*

Some interviewees also framed Syrians as a security threat. For example, Ömer emphasized criminality among Syrians, presenting them as inherently dangerous:

"But it was uncontrolled. Those who entered Turkey... some of them have killed people, some committed robbery, some are on trial in Syria, they have criminal records. He (Erdoğan) opened the door and piled them all into Turkey—he let them in without control." (Ömer)

Others articulated a symbolic or cultural form of threat, which, as Stephan et al. (1999) define, is based on perceived differences in moral values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes between ingroup and outgroup members. Osman provides a clear example of such a cultural-symbolic threat, emphasizing religious and moral distinctions between "us" and "them":

"I think they are culturally different from us. They are more religious, that's how I see it. I think if there is a safe environment, they should go." (Osman)

A similar notion appears in Fırat's statement, where he portrays Syrians as transforming local urban and cultural spaces:

"I realized that the men are now in normal Turkey, they have settled down like citizens here, they have adopted living here, they started to bring their own culture, they started to open their own shops and markets. They literally built their own streets. There is a side in Ovaeymir—there's a barber, a market, the hookah shops are already famous." (Fırat)

These narratives illustrate how economic, cultural, and security-based anxieties merge into a broader discourse of scapegoating, where Syrians are collectively blamed for structural problems such as inflation,

unemployment, and social change. The findings suggest that perceived threat operates as both a justification and reinforcement of social distance and exclusion, linking individual perceptions to wider symbolic and moral boundaries among participants.

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CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The figure 5.1 below illustrates the coding densities of the interviewees within three meta-categories. In selecting the interviewees, I prioritized individuals who had migrated to Aydın—i.e., those with actual migration experience—as well as those born and raised in Aydın to families who had migrated, but who themselves did not have direct migration experience. The rationale behind this selection was to examine, in light of the existing literature, whether actual migration experience might influence perceptions and attitudes toward Syrians.

As observed, when comparing interviewees with and without migration experience within the context of the meta-categories, those with actual migration experience exhibit more intense negative perceptions and attitudes toward Syrians. Additionally, interviewees with actual migration experience display higher levels of Kurdish(group)ness markers compared to those without such experience. However, in terms of positive perceptions and attitudes, no significant differences were observed between the two groups.

Figure 5.1 Documents sets comparison in relation to meta-categories (Created by author by using MAXQDA, 2025)

The subsequent Figure 5.2 below presents a detailed comparison of interviewees with and without actual migration experience in the context of negative perceptions and attitudes. As observed, both groups exhibit the external categorization of Syrians, perceive them as a threat, and engage in stigmatization of Syrians.

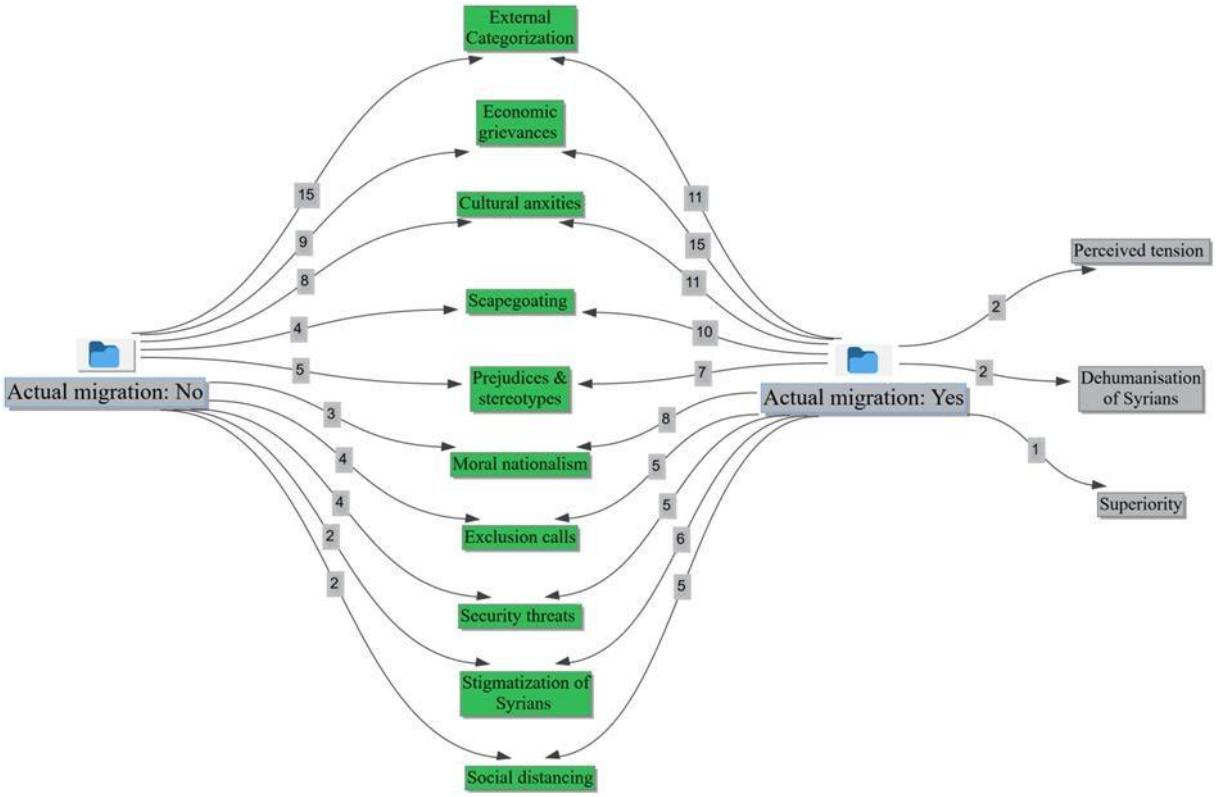

Figure 5.2 Documents sets comparison in relation to Negative Perceptions and Attitudes (Created by author by using MAXQDA, 2025)

However, a notable finding is that some extreme forms of stigmatization—namely, dehumanization and superiority based on the perceived inferiority of Syrians—emerged exclusively among the group with actual migration experience.

At this point, it was observed that the argument in the literature suggesting that shared experiences between groups can foster positive intergroup relations within minority populations through the mechanism of intergroup empathy did not emerge among the participants of this study. A similar pattern can be observed in the interviewees' expressions regarding the stigmatization of Syrians. Contrary to the argument in the literature that stigmatized groups can relate to members of other stigmatized groups, the participants, when stigmatizing Syrians, revealed a form of mirrored stigmatization similar to that directed toward Kurds.

For instance, the neighborhood where the study was conducted is associated with crime and danger in Aydın. While spending time in another neighborhood in the city center, one can still easily hear that the

Ovaeymir poses a security threat for the city. Similarly, the interviewees perceived Syrians as a security threat, explaining that they increased crime rates and caused social unrest. Likewise, when examining the stigmatization of Kurds, terms such as “uncivilized” and “backward” have been shown to be prevalent in some studies (Saracoglu, 2011). In a comparable manner, some interviewees categorized Syrians using the same terminology.

However, when examining the interviewees as a whole, although the shared experiences of migration and of stigmatized identity did not generally lead to a common disadvantaged identity that transcends in-group and out-group distinctions, this phenomenon was observed, albeit rarely, among some participants. Notably, the two participants who demonstrated inclusion emphasized shared experiences. Similarly, these two participants also highlighted their religious identity during the self-identification process through Islam. In their expressions of inclusion and positive perceptions and attitudes, they referred to Islam to emphasize a sense of brotherhood linked to a supra-national identity. In this respect, it can be argued that Wimmer’s boundary-making strategy of boundary blurring was activated. Indeed, Wimmer himself cited religious identities, such as Islam, as examples to illustrate this strategy(Wimmer, 2008).

At this point, the findings also resonate with Mustafa and Richard’s (2019) study across 15 European countries, which showed that Islam-based shared religious identity can lead to favorable attitudes toward newly arrived migrants. This pattern was evident in the two participants mentioned above. However, it is important to note that, aside from these two, there was a third participant who also emphasized their Islamic identity. This individual initially identified as Muslim and then as Kurdish, but stated that only being Muslim was important and that racial differences did not matter. Nevertheless, an examination of this participant’s perceptions and attitudes toward Syrians revealed a picture completely opposite to that of the other two profiles. This suggests that the blurring of boundaries is shaped by individual meaning-making processes, and definitive generalizations should be avoided.

Mustafa and Richards (2019) also highlighted the positive effects of intergroup contact and interaction, in line with Intergroup Contact Theory (Hewstone, 2015). Indeed, although some positive outcomes of contact and interaction were observed in this context, when examining the general attitudes of the interviewees—despite living in the same neighborhood—these effects were not sufficiently manifested. On the contrary, the prevailing attitude was characterized by social distance, reflecting minimal everyday contact with Syrians and a lack of desire to change this situation. Nevertheless, in the overall picture, a few participants who generally exhibited highly negative attitudes demonstrated examples of destigmatization or positive labeling emerging from job-related contact. These instances, although limited, reflect the potential positive impact of contact and interaction.

Moreover, when examining the interviewees' calls for exclusion, it was observed that they generally qualified their exclusionary statements with phrases such as "in safe conditions." This can be attributed to the fact that the interviews were conducted at a time when the Assad regime was on the verge of collapse. Only one participant, Ercan, expressed a consistently uncompromising stance, advocating that Syrians should leave immediately. The primary motivation behind his attitude was twofold: culturally, he perceived Syrians as "culturless" and "backward" due to their Middle Eastern background; economically, as a barber operating in the same street, he was concerned about competition from a Syrian-owned barber shop.

However, it is noteworthy that the only situation in which Ercan did not display negative perceptions or attitudes was in an interaction with a Syrian Kurd. Ercan described this experience using a commonly used expression, stating that "when someone is Kurdish, it resembles a relative." Similarly, a few other participants also exhibited positive attitudes based on Kurdishness, suggesting that a transnational Kurdish identity can foster positive perceptions. Indeed, studies on the Kurdish diaspora have shown that Kurds living across four different states with diverse ideological orientations tend to unite around transnational Kurdishness in response to significant events in the homeland (Yilmaz & Demir M, 2023, Demir, 2017, Toivanen, 2021).

A shared element in the positive perceptions and attitudes expressed by nearly all interviewees concerned the assistance and support that was offered to Syrians when they first settled in the neighborhood. This early phase of solidarity was often remembered favorably and appeared to shape initial interpersonal dynamics. However, this pattern is likely connected to the broader sociopolitical climate at the time of their arrival. As several studies have demonstrated, Syrians were generally welcomed by the wider Turkish society in the initial years of displacement, frequently being framed as "guests" in need of protection and humanitarian assistance (Kaya, 2016; Konda Research, 2016).

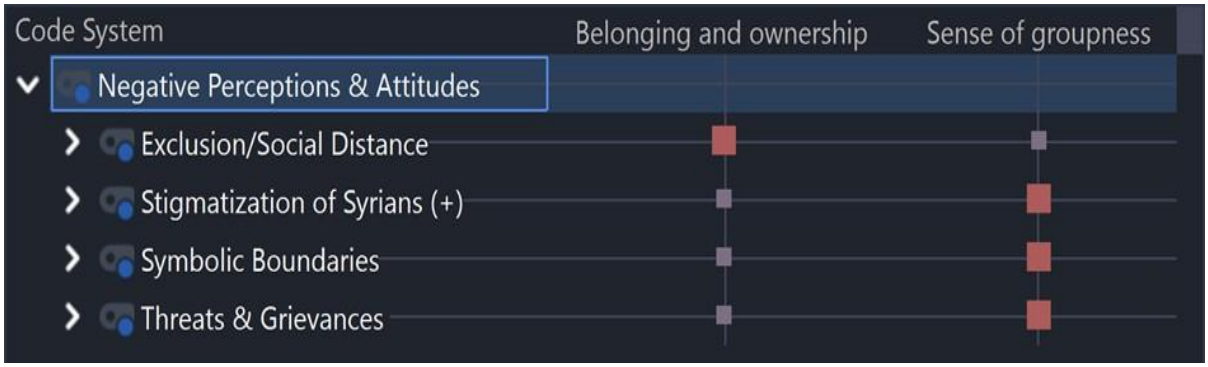

Figure 5.3 Co-occurrence model (created by the author using MAXQDA, 2025)

The figure 5.3 above illustrates how frequently the interviewees' statements expressing negative perceptions and attitudes intersect with the expressions categorized under the Kurdish (group)ness meta-category, specifically those reflecting a sense of groupness as well as belonging and ownership. In this regard, there appears to be a meaningful relationship between the interviewees' modes of self-identification, their sense of groupness and belonging/ownership, and their negative perceptions and attitudes toward Syrians.

A recurrent theme in the participants' internal identifications was the experience of Kurdishness as a stigmatized identity. Although the stigmatization of Kurds was articulated more intensely by those with actual migration experience, it nonetheless emerged as a shared theme across the interviews. Yet this was not universal: one participant rejected the notion that Kurdishness is a stigmatized identity, grounding his

stance in his personal experiences. This diversity illustrates that, when internal identification is considered alongside external categorization (stigmatization), Kurdishness in this study appears nominally the same but virtually different—participants share the same ethnonym but inhabit it through distinct experiences and meanings. This underscores that identity is not a fixed attribute but a relational and power-embedded process, continually produced and reproduced through shifting historical and social conditions.

Another shared theme was a strong sense of belonging and ownership toward Turkey. Many participants drew symbolic boundaries between themselves and Syrians through this sense of ownership. However, this form of belonging should not be conflated with the classical notion of *national identity*, which is frequently invoked in migration studies to explain anti-immigrant attitudes. Although all participants are legally categorized as "Turkish" on their identity cards, their internal identification processes—both individual and collective—revolved around Kurdishness as cultural distinctiveness and practices of boundary maintenance (Barth, 1969).

Thus, if their exclusionary attitudes were rooted purely in national identity, they would not resist being identified as Turkish. Likewise, reducing their sense of belonging and ownership to ethnic identity alone would also be misleading. While some participants articulated ethnicized notions of superiority and inferiority, the overarching pattern revealed a boundary framed primarily in moral terms. Syrians were often portrayed not as ethnically inferior, nor merely as a demographic threat, but as morally inferior and undeserving—particularly male refugees, who were criticized for settling in Turkey rather than remaining in their homeland to fight. Such expressions, coded as moral nationalism, framed Syrians' presence as a violation of moral expectations regarding duty, sacrifice, and rightful belonging.

A similar moral logic was evident in the interviewees' articulations of Kurdish (group)ness. When constructing a "sense of groupness," many participants invoked historical narratives related to the foundational moments of the Turkish Republic, including the War of Independence and World War I. By highlighting Kurdish participation in these events—asserting that Kurds were foundational to the

establishment of the Republic, that they differ in no essential way from Turks, and that their ancestors also fought for the country—participants asserted a moralized claim to ownership of the homeland. Given the historical stigmatization of Kurds, such discursive strategies can also be read through Wimmer's concept of normative inversion(2008, p. 991), wherein a minority group aims to elevate its position within an existing hierarchy and assert moral worth, legitimacy, and entitlement to equal political and cultural rights.

In sum, the participants' sense of belonging and ownership cannot be fully explained by conventional understandings of national identity, nor can it be reduced to ethnic identity alone. Rather, it constitutes a historically grounded, morally infused social identity, one that draws upon collective memory, moral narratives, and citizenship as an institutional framework—yet mobilizes citizenship strategically to articulate claims of rightful membership and to distinguish themselves from Syrians.

While moral nationalism and symbolic boundary-making were central to participants' anti-Syrian stances, reducing these attitudes solely to moral or symbolic dynamics would be a selective approach. Another prominent and recurring dimension across interviews was economic grievances. Yet this was not solely expressed through a classical "competition with the outgroup" narrative in which in-group members homogenize the outgroup as a direct economic threat. Rather, participants linked Syrians to the country's broader economic decline, interpreting macro-level hardship through the figure of the Syrians. Thus, threat perceptions should be viewed as the form of scapegoating. Given a political and media environment in which Syrians are portrayed as responsible for a wide array of societal problems—and where political actors can promise their return as an electoral pledge—it is unsurprising that interviewees reproduced similar narratives. As Giddens (2006, p. 494) notes, scapegoating is particularly common when the targeted group is both distinctive and politically powerless.

Taken together, this study does not claim, as some quantitative work attempts to determine, whether threat perceptions trigger identity dynamics, or whether identity configurations shape threat perceptions. Instead, the interviews suggested that Jenkins's(2008, 2014) distinction between groups (internally defined) and

categories (externally assigned) offered the most analytically productive lens. Participants' internal individual and collective identifications and their external categorizations of Syrians interacted to shape their social identities and their perception and attitudes. This should not be read as a universal claim that "Kurds are a group and Syrians are a category," but rather as an observation emergent from a specific locality and a small qualitative sample. The findings reflect only the twelve participants interviewed.

Nevertheless, the study contributes to a largely underdeveloped area within Turkish migration research, namely the boundaries and identification of Kurds who have migrated to western Turkey, as well as their perceptions and attitudes toward Syrians. While migration studies often rely on national identity or taken for granted in-group ethnicities to explain anti-immigrant attitudes, the boundaries observed here were not solely ethnic nor purely national. Instead, participants invoked institutional (citizenship), moral, and ethnic boundaries that shifted contextually. Ethnicity intersected with—and was sometimes overridden by—higher-order identifications. Participants distinguished themselves as Kurds (B) from Turks (A), yet when situating Syrians in the narrative, they aligned with Turks within a broader national-moral category (C). This demonstrates the fluid, multi-layered, and situational nature of identification processes that shape attitudes toward newcomers.

APPENDIX

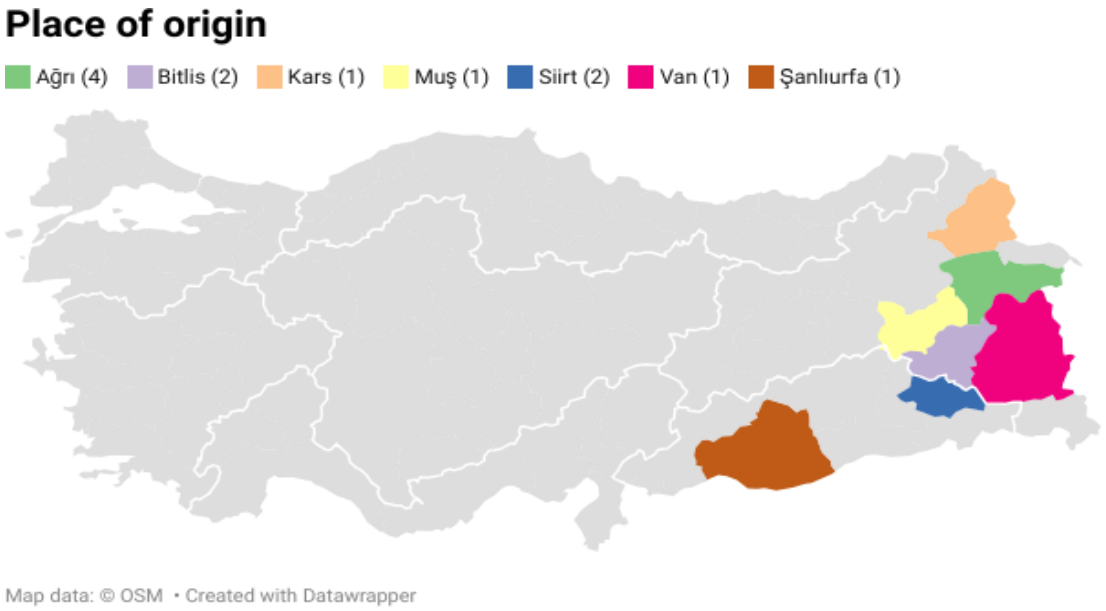

Figure 6. Place of origin of the interviewees (created with Datawrapper, 2025)

Pseudonym	Actual Migration	Age	Occupation	Place of origin	Gender	Education
Fırat	No	26	Construction sector	Muş	Male	College graduate
Osman	No	24	Construction sector	Ağrı	Male	College student
Melik	No	25	Construction sector	Bitlis	Male	High school graduate
Dilan	No	28	Public servant	Ağrı	Female	College graduate
İsa	Yes	60	Retired	Ağrı	Male	High school graduate
Gülistan	Yes	50	Farm worker	Siirt	Female	Primary school drop-out
Ercan	Yes	45	Barber	Siirt	Male	High school graduate
Berfin	Yes	56	Housewife	Kars	Female	Primary school drop-out
Ali	No	25	Waiter	Bitlis	Male	College graduate
Ömer	Yes	65	Tabacco seller	Şanlıurfa	Male	Primary school drop-out
Sırrı	Yes	55	Retired	Van	Male	Primary school drop-out
Veysi	Yes	60	Small shop owner	Ağrı	Male	Primary school drop-out

Table 1. Variables of the interviewees

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