**Oğuzhan İzmir**

**Tutku Öztel**

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**The Impact of Tragic Incidents on the Public Discourse on Syrian Refugees: The Case of Ali al-Hamdan’s Murder**

**Introduction**

Turkey is hosting more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees, most of whom came after the Syrian Civil War started. The magnitude of the population and the significance of issue with regards to Turkey’s foreign relations and domestic affairs made Syrian refugee influx a hot topic. To understand and make sense of the current situation and provide solutions both to the problems faced by Syrian refugees and also problems originating from the host-refugee encounters, the attitudes of the general public with regards to Syrian refugees in Turkey is extensively studied in the literature. It is indicated that while in the early stages of refugee intake the public discourse was shaped around the idea and value of hospitality, in the following stages the discourse on refugees was securitized, in the sense that Syrian refugees are treated as “risky outsiders.” However, it can be argued that public discourse is a malleable construct that is shaped by new developments. We argue that the tragic incident in which Ali al-Hamdan, a Syrian teenager, was shot by a policeman in Adana, Turkey was such a significant event that transformed the public attitude towards refugees in Turkey. Furthermore, we argue that the tragic incident brought the issues concealed by the securitized discourse forward. To test our argument, we will first give a brief narrative of the period starting with the Syrian Civil War and cite the findings in the literature to illustrate the public attitude towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. Then, we will discuss the literature on tragic events and public discourse to provide a theoretical basis for our argument. Lastly, we will test our arguments through a quantitative analysis of tweets on Syrian refugees posted in Turkish before and after the shooting of Ali al-Hamdan.

**Syrian Refugees in Turkey and Public Discourse: A Narrative**

Following the trend in the Arab world, civil unrest has emerged in Syria, which then transformed into an armed conflict around 2011. The protestors demanded several reforms to increase the accountability of government. However, Bashar al-Assad who was then in the office for 11 years replied with crushing the protestors to death rather than giving the concession to increase the democratic freedoms enjoyed by the citizens of Syria. Moreover, he accused the demonstrators of conspiring against Syria to push an “Israeli agenda”. The unrest accelerated more when the thousands of people were displaced which in turn draw the big international powers into the conflict. Involvement of the third parties prolonged the conflict such that the country became a playground for the interests of the US, Russia, Iran and Turkey. Even though it is for the benefit of every party to have a united and more democratic Syria in order to prevent further conflicts, every party is quite decisive to take the most out of the conflict.

The incidents brought instability to the region. While the civil war in Syria transformed into an emergency, Syrians fleeing the country stir up another problem for Turkey. While we are about to enter the eighth year of the conflict, it is estimated that half of the Syrian population has emigrated. According to the UN Refugee Agency, 6.6 million Syrians are internally displaced. (2018) Most of those who fled the country took refugee in nearby countries and Europe. Turkey has cultural and filial ties with Syria and also is sharing a 900 km long border. Therefore, it became the top destination for Syrians who are looking for a safe place. According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Interior of Turkey, there has occurred a surge in the number of Syrian refugees during 2013, increasing the number of people under temporary protection rose from 224,655 to 1,519,286. The number quickly escalated to a two and a half million in the following year. While Turkey pursued an open-door policy, the ambiguity in the legal status of Syrians together with the absence of an administrative framework through which the needs and problems of Syrians are addressed paved the way for a “refugee crisis” in Turkey. The current number of Syrians living under temporary protection is stated as 3,622,748 by the Directorate General of Migration Management. (2020) Most of these immigrants are settled in the cities near the border and the metropolitan areas of Turkey. A small percentage is hosted in the camps.

As stated previously, the legal framework within which Syrians are considered by the government authorities was left as an ambiguous one and stayed as the main topic of discussion on the Syrian refugee discourse. Turkey does not offer refugee status to citizens of countries other than of European Council members. In line with the geographical limitation to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Syrians fleeing the Civil War are also provided with temporary protection rather than refugee status. (General Directorate of Migration Management) This regulation saves Turkey from the legal burden of providing basic needs and integration of Syrians under temporary protection. Therefore, Syrians fleeing to Turkey are left without opportunities to integrate into society and clear prospects in which they can plan their lives.

**Discursive Strategies of the Political Parties**

In the early stages of the crisis the governing AKP pursued a discourse that described Syrian refugees as temporary “guests.” The “infamous hospitality” of Turkish society was frequently emphasized. The analogy of “muhajir-ansar” was also frequently called forth. In the words of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in a speech given to refugees in one of the refugee camps in Gaziantep: “You have been forced to leave your homes, so you have become muhajirs for us. Therefore, we became ansars for you using all of our means available to help you.” (Presidency of Turkish Republic, 2014, translaation by authors) It is evident that this is not a statement of an ordinary immigrant-host country relationship. It is, in fact, a reference to Hegira where Islamic prophet Muhammed migrates under pressure of “heretics” with his followers from Mecca to Medina. AKP was criticized by main opposition party CHP for its lack of human rights perspective. However, CHP authorities also made many statements that overemphasize the demographic, social and economic threats residing in the issue without taking into account the dimension of human rights. Moreover, it can be argued that CHP preferred a discursive strategy that represented the Syrian refugees as a burden on the Turkish taxpayers.

**Studies on the Attitudes Towards Syrian Refugees in Turkey**

A study by Recep Gülmez indicates that the securitized discourse held by political parties played a significant role in the rise of anti-refugee attitudes in Turkey. (2019) Another study by Zeynep Siretioglu Girgin and Gizem Turna Cebeci research the impact of immigration policies on the natives’ attitudes towards Syrian refugees. They state that while the studied sample perceives the open-door policy a fair one, the problems in the economic integration of Syrian refugees brought about negative attitudes. (Girgin & Cebeci, 2017) Another study focusing on the attitudes of middle-aged housewives in Mersin, a city close to the Syrian border, indicate negative attitudes caused by the lack of social interaction and language barriers. (Özçürümez & Mete, 2020) Similarly, a survey experiment researching the university students’ attitudes indicate that feeling of empathy and increased distance from nationalist parties correlated negatively with the development of negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees (Aktaş, Tepe & Persson, 2018)

Studies researching the public attitudes and public discourse on Syrian refugees on online forums stress the dominance of negative attitudes in the representation of and perception towards Syrian refugees. A study focusing on Ekşi Sözlük and Uludağ Sözlük, two prominent online forums in Turkish, distinguished seven different repertoires through which Syrian refugees are discussed. These repertoires vary from negative ones such as otherization and threat discourse to positive ones such as the ones stressing empathy and supra-identities. (Yıldırım & Yurtdaş, 2016) A master’s thesis focusing primarily on Ekşi Sözlük refers to nationalism as the main reason behind the scapegoating Syrian refugees. (Ünür, 2018) Studies analysing social media entries also indicate similar results. A qualitative study analyzing a total of 98 entries develops seven thematic units similar to ones developed by Yıldırım and Yurttaş. (Özdemir & Öner-Özkan, 2016) The discussion on voting rights and citizenship prospects for Syrians is another cause of anti-Syrian sentiments in social media. (Özaydın, 2018)

The studies cited above conceptualize attitudes as a static concept that is shaped by demographic (age, education level, gender) or social interaction and political stance of the individual. However, the public attitude towards refugees could also be conceptualized as a malleable construct that changes shape in interaction with social phenomena under change. For instance, a study focusing on the impacts of a tragic event, the death of Alan Kurdi, questions whether the circulation of the images of the dead body of the refugee child caused a shift in the public opinion towards refugees. Their study is a qualitative one that analyzes 961 tweets covering one year. They track whether those who tweeted about the death of Alan Kurdi have changed their position on refugees. However, they state that the images circulated in the social media did not change the main discourse, rather the perceptions of the event were incorporated into the existing discourse in Belgium and Turkey, respectively. (Bozdağ & Smets, 2017) Another study focusing on the Copenhagen Shootings similarly indicates no change of the public attitudes towards refugees in Denmark after the tragic incident. (Smiley, Emerson & Markussen, 2017) However, both of these studies are qualitative and therefore has a narrower scope than a quantitative study might entail. Moreover, both state the need for further studies.

**Method**

**Operationalization of the Variables**

Following Paul Pierson’s analogy of natural disasters, the causal mechanism of our study resembles a tornado that is a one with short term cause and a short term outcome. (2003) In other words, we study the short term outcome of a rapidly developing incident, that is the killing of Ali al-Hamdan. The main object of concern is to find out whether public discussion on the issue transformed into a one that gives a greater emphasis on the rights of refugees whether be it supportive or antagonistic. In order to operationalize the weight of right-based arguments among the greater discussion on Syrian refugees and migrants on social media among the Turkish users, we search for the frequency of the Turkish counterpart of the word “right.” We calculated the frequency of the word among the entries on Twitter concerning Syrian refugees and immigrants by taking the percentage of those tweets that included our keyword. We also included tensed versions of “right” in Turkish, such as “hakkı, hakları, hakkımız, hakkınız.” However, a shortcoming side of study should be indicated. The word “hak” could also mean “about” when it is tensed in a specific form, such as “hakkında.” Moreover, it might also carry religious connotations in addition to legal ones, such as meanings referring to “divine justice.” We tried to overcome the first shortcoming by not including those specific tensed versions of the word. Besides, we argue that as the “divine justice” could be a basis of justification for legal justice, especially in a religious or traditional context. Therefore, it does not pose a problem with regards to our goals.

In order to measure the increase in the weight of right-based arguments among the greater discussion on Syrian refugees and migrants on social media among the Turkish users, we calculated the percentage of tweets posted on a day that contained the word “right” as a fraction of the tweets that posted on the same day that include the keywords “migrant,” “refugee,” “muhajir,” “Syrian.” To operationalize the impact of the incident, we developed two independent variables. First variable is denoted as “dates” refers to the closeness of the data point to the incident day. We divided the period between the 22nd of April and 12nd of May into three periods to analyze the impact of the tragic incident. The first period, that is before the incident happened, represents the absence of the impact of the independent variable. The second period, that is until the 4th of May, represents the prior impact of the independent variable. As the incident created a rapid increase in the number of tweets regarding Syrian asylum-seekers, we also included a third period where the incident lost its news value. The periods variable indicates one of the three periods that include the data point. (before the event, soon after the event, after the event lost its news value)

**Data collection**

We drew our data using Twitter API. We searched for tweets including the Turkish counterparts of these words: migrant(göçmen), Syrian(s)(Suriyeli(ler)), refugee(mülteci), muhajir(muhacir). The terms refugee and migrant refer to different concepts in the sense that taking refuge is a specific form of forced immigration. However, during the history of the Republic of Turkey, the existence of frequent and large scale forced migration flows conflated the two terms into the concept of “göçmen.” The Greek-Turkish demographic exchange, immigration flows from Macedonia, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Romania until the end of Second World War and many other migratory flows from eastern neighbours of Turkey such as Iraq after 1988 Halabja Chemical Attack and after 1991 Gulf War can be given as examples of forced migration to Turkey. Besides, Turkey put a clause on the Convention Relating to Status of Refugees indicating that only those asylum seekers coming from Europe are to be provided with refugee status. Another important point is that AKP’s discursive strategy of defining Syrian asylum seekers as muhajirs has gone down well with its electoral base. Therefore, our choice of these keywords to find tweets referring to Syrian asylum seekers is justified on these grounds. We collected a total of 100,425 tweets for the period between 22nd of April and 12nd of May. These tweets represent the online public discourse on Syrian refugees within this period. In the second step, we searched for the dependent variable keyword, that is “right.” Among those tweets, 196 included the word “right” and its other tensed versions.

**Data Analysis**

We conducted a Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) analysis to investigate whether the frequency of the use of the keyword has increased after the incident. Specifically, we investigated how the effect of the closeness of the dates to the incident day on the percentage of tweets containing the dependent variable keyword has changed across the three pre-defined periods. To examine this relation, we investigated the interaction *between* the closeness of the date to the incident day *and* the period that contain the date *on* the percentage of tweets containing the keyword “right”. Concludingly, our regression model was formulated as:

Percentage of tweets containing “right” ~ dates \* periods + constant + error

Where ~ stands for “predicted from” and asterisk expresses the interaction term. The model included all lower terms as the main effect on the dependent variable (i.e., the percentage of tweets containing “right” as a fraction of total dataset). The dates variable indicates the date of the data point. The periods variable indicates one of the three periods that include the data point. (before the event, soon after the event, after the event lost its news value)

**Results**

Our results do not point to a statistically significant increase in the percentages of tweets that included the keywords we were interested in during the different periods. The regression analysis results indicate that neither of the dependent variables has p values small enough to indicate a significant impact on the dependent variable. The independent variable of dates has a p-value of 0.163, the variable periods has a p-value of 0.077 and the interaction variable has a p-value of -0.165. (See Table 1) Moreover, even though there is no statistical significance, the weeks following the incident demonstrates lower percentages, contrary to our expectations. (See Figure 1)

The previous studies researching the impact of tragic incidents such as the death of Alan Kurdi or the Copenhagen Shooting find no impact of these sorrowful events and their images distributed on social media did not found any considerable impact on the public sentiments and opinions. (Bozdağ & Smets, 2017)(Smiley, Emerson & Markussen, 2017) Our findings can be considered in line with these studies. The main reason why such triggering incidents do not pave the way for a change in the discourse regarding refugees and migrants might be the discursive strategies of news agencies. The way news published have a significant impact on the responses given to this news. In the case of Ali al-Hamdan, news agencies preferred a strategy that protected the policeman. Especially pro-government news agencies such as Doğan News Agency (DHA) stated that the policeman shot the young Syrian by mistake and stressed that Syrian teen did not follow the orders of the policeman. Moreover, some went as far as to claim that Ali al-Hamdan was shot on his leg. However, later findings indicate that he was shot on his heart and from the front rather than behind as would be expected from an abscondment scenario. (Topçu, 2020) Most of this news was later cleared off by these agencies. However, articles demonstrating such misinformation and distortion of public opinion are still present. (BirGün, 2020) It can be argued that the way the news of the incident broadcasted affected the public opinion such that those citizens that follow pro-government news agencies perceived the event as a “twist of fate” rather than a tragic event that demonstrates police misconduct directed against a legally non-protected asylum-seeker. However, it should also be noted that due to reasons beyond our control we could only analyze a 16 days long period which could be considered a short one. Therefore, replication of our study with a larger time frame and thus a larger dataset could provide different results.

**Conclusion**

Our study fell short of providing statistically significant results. Therefore, we cannot argue whether the woeful event of the murder of Ali al-Hamdan by a police officer had an impact on the social media entries of Turkish speaking Twitter users. It could be argued that, in line with the previous studies, the way such news are presented is effective for the shaping of public discourse immigrants. In the case of the murder of Ali al-Hamdan, biased broadcast by the pro-government news agencies, that is the majority of them (Erdoğan and Çetinkaya, 2017), might have absorbed the influence of the incident. However, in order to understand whether in fact the public opinion on Twitter has remained unchanged our study should be replicated with a larger dataset that includes a wider time period. In addition, the discursive impact of the media should be analyzed through a qualitative analysis.

**Tables and Figures**

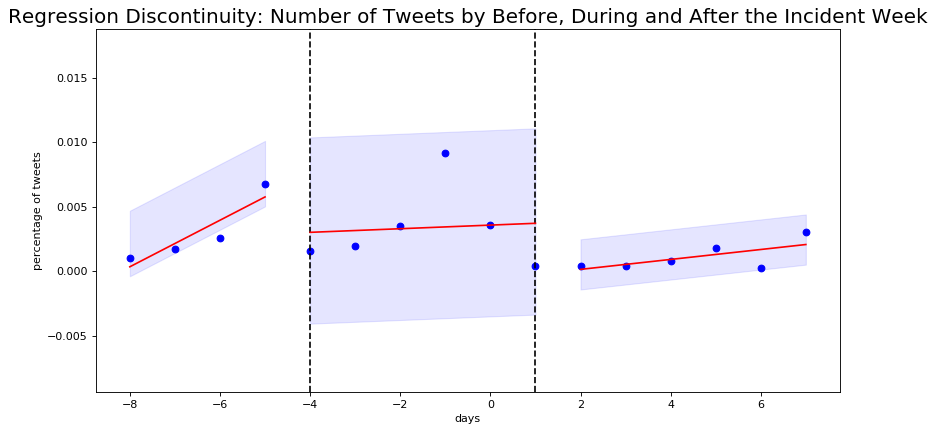


Figure 1. The relationship between the consecutive days and percentage of tweets for three time periods. The most left-hand side panel depicts this relationship for the first time period (i.e., one week before the incident week), and most right-hand side panel depicts for the last time period (i.e., one week after the incident week). Every number on the x axis expresses the unique dates. The shaded areas around the regression lines express the 95% confidence intervals of the fits.

OLS Regression Results

F-statistic: 1.840

R-squared: 0.315

R-squared: 0.144

Df Residuals: 12

Df Model: 3

variable Estimate  *SE t*   *p-value*  95% CI

Intercept 0.0043 0.001 3.877 0.002 [0.002 - 0.007]

dates 0.0006 0.000 1.487 0.163 [-0.000 - 0.001]

periods -0.0043 0.002 -1.937 0.077 [-0.009 - 0.001]

dates : periods -0.0003 0.000 -1.479 0.165 [-0.001 - 0.000]

Table 1. Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) results.

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