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Religion and Solidarity: Faith-Based Support for Refugees in Turkey

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Abstract

This study investigates the dynamics of refugee solidarity among Islamic communities in Istanbul, focusing on the Fatih district. Drawing on fieldwork and qualitative analysis, it explores how religious beliefs, Islamic discourse, and state-promoted notions of "Islamic brotherhood" shape practices of solidarity toward refugees. The findings demonstrate that while faith-based motivations enable acts of solidarity, such support is often hierarchical, conditional, and influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors. Shared religious identity does not necessarily guarantee equitable access or genuine inclusion within mosque communities and other Islamic spaces.

The study also emphasizes the role of theologies of migration in shaping solidarity practices. Religious interpretations and theological frameworks provide moral and ethical justifications for supporting refugees, yet these interpretations can simultaneously reinforce social hierarchies and boundaries. Understanding how Islamic theological discourse interacts with local social, political, and economic contexts is crucial for analyzing both the enabling and limiting effects of faith-based solidarity.

Overall, the study shows that faith-based solidarity is complex: it can facilitate support but also reproduce social boundaries. Adopting a critical, rights-based perspective is essential for ensuring that solidarity is inclusive, socially grounded, and sustainable. The findings contribute to debates in migration studies, humanitarian aid, and the sociology of religion, offering insights into the potentials and limitations of religiously motivated solidarity in urban Turkey.

Keywords: refugee solidarity, faith-based solidarity, Islamic communities, social inclusion, theologies of migration, Turkey

Introduction

The second field study of our SolRoutes project follows the logic of the first two reports by conducting research in a different setting. In the first report, I examined the development of civil society in Turkey concerning migration and refugees, the emergence of a segment of 'civil society' composed of citizens supporting refugees, and how these actors became integrated into the state's refugee reception processes. Additionally, I highlighted the state's multilayered and fluid policies toward civil society and citizen participation, ranging from surveillance and intervention to selective inclusion and exclusionary practices.

The second report, based on field research, aims to understand the imaginations and implementations of solidarities in religiously motivated solidarity movements within Islamic communities by contextualizing them within a broader social and political framework. The fieldwork research donducted in the Fatih district of Istanbul. Second node research pursues the question of how solidarity among migrants is woven within religious communities. This question has ultimately been discussed around the themes of how faith and the state relate to the Islamic community and civil society.

Since the Second World War, the dominant perspective in academic literature has assumed a secularization process within modernity, a view that has also influenced migration studies. As a result, migration and religion have often been treated as separate and even disconnected phenomena (Saunders et al., 2016: vii; Ivanescu, 2016). However, despite expectations that modernity would lead to secularization and the diminishing importance of religion, religious dynamics have continued to shape public debates, political structures, social movements, and even conflicts. In the age of migration (de Haas, Castles and Miller, 2019), religion remains significant not only in migrants' lives but also in the spatial organization, interpersonal relationships, and policies of transit and destination countries regarding integration and exclusion.

The Enlightenment-informed dichotomy between reason and belief embedded in modernity has also shaped migration discourse, fostering expectations that migrants would undergo a transformation along the spectrum of integration-assimilation. When such expectations were not met, Western societies sought to address the issue through multiculturalism and religious tolerance. Consequently, from the 1990s onward, there has been a growing academic interest in religion and belief (Saunders et al., 2016:3). Moreover, migration and migrant religiosity have repositioned religion as a central issue in public discourse (Henkel & Knippenberg, 2005:7). In Turkey, while early Republican policies assumed that modernity would inevitably erode religious influence, skepticism toward this assumption emerged shortly after the Republic's establishment. By the 1980s, religion's impact on social life had become increasingly visible, both in rural and urban contexts.

Despite the quantitative and qualitative growth of migration studies in Turkey since the 2000s, the field remains remarkably 'religion/blind.' While a few studies acknowledge the role of religion in migration movements in Turkey (Day and İçduygu, 1998; Akçapınar, 2006, 2007;

2019; Şaul, 2025; also see below), discussions on migration and religion largely remain confined to contemporary political debates. It is particularly striking that, despite extensive discussions on the arrival of Syrians in Turkey and the role of the Islamic-oriented ruling party, the AKP, there has been little corresponding academic research. Similarly, although religious affinity and Islamic brotherhood narratives played a significant role in facilitating the acceptance of millions of refugees within Islamic communities, this theme has received relatively limited academic attention[1].

Methodology

This report presents the findings of four months of fieldwork conducted in Istanbul between November 2024 and February 2025. This research involved ethnographic observation and qualitative interviews. I conducted unstructured, in-depth interviews with seven refugee supporters: a civil society worker, a member of a volunteer refugee solidarity network, a human rights defender and notary, a lawyer specializing in asylum and migration, and a hotel manager. The interviews covered topics such as their own lives, how they engage with the migration and asylum field, and how they experience solidarity in their own lives. The life story interview was conducted in two separate sessions with a human rights defender who describes himself as 'radical' in his faith.

This report is based on field research conducted among Islamic and faith-based communities that identify themselves through Islam and belief. It presents findings on the theme of solidarity with refugees within these circles.

Communities adhering to Islam encompass a wide spectrum of religious orientations, socio-political positions, and modes of public engagement. In both colloquial and scholarly discourse, various labels—such as Islamist, religiously devout, conservative, or pious—are employed to describe these groups. These designations are not neutral; they are often embedded with normative judgments that reflect broader ideological or political positions. Given the lack of a universally accepted definition for these terms, it is analytically necessary to specify what is meant by those who self-identify as religious, articulate themselves through Islamic discourses, and engage in practices grounded in Islamic references—particularly in the context of the discussion that follows.

The theoretical framework and focus of the literature have been shaped by the terminology employed to describe Islamism and Islamists (Yücesoy, 2025: 18). In the analysis of field data in this study, the terms used were sometimes based on participants' self-definitions. In cases where individuals did not provide a specific label for themselves, they were generally referred to as pious individuals or pious groups. Similarly, terms such as believing communities,

[1] In the special issue of the journal *Diyanet*, published by the Presidency of Religious Affairs of Turkey and titled *Migration and Sociocultural Change* (2018), several articles addressed the relationship between religion and migration. Another example in this field is the edited volume by Kirman and Dölek (2021). Studies focusing specifically on Syrians include Akkır (2019), Yaralıoğlu and Güngör (2020), and Erdoğan (2016). In the context of Turkish migrants in Europe, notable contributions include Çoştu (Ed., 2020), Çelik (2008), and Arabacı (2020).

conservatives, and related expressions were used interchangeably with pious in this context. Regarding institutional civil society actors, designations such as faith-based or Islamic civil society organizations were used with similar intent and meaning.

The often-insular nature of Islamic communities, which frequently necessitates insider referrals or prolonged immersion, poses a significant challenge for researchers seeking to gain access. Due to the insular nature of these communities, I sought entry through networks that were more receptive to 'outsiders.' In particular, she focused on a recently established organization that emerged as a breakaway group from Tarlabaşı Solidarity—a collective that has long provided support to refugees in Istanbul. This new organization, Sınırsız Dayanışma, consists of self-identified anti-capitalist Muslims. While this was not the sole research setting, it served as a crucial entry point that significantly shaped the scope of the fieldwork and the networks to which she gained access.

Beyond this network, I was able to establish connections with individuals affiliated with the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi- hereforth AKP) through references obtained from more mainstream Islamic circles. However, despite the fact that nearly all of the interlocutors from Islamic backgrounds had some level of affiliation with religious communities, they remained highly cautious when discussing these groups. Conversations about Islamic communities tended to occur within tightly controlled discursive boundaries, and the interlocutors consistently refrained from facilitating direct contact with community members.

This reluctance can be understood within a broader socio-political context. Islamic communities in Turkey are not only deeply insular but are also widely regarded as part of the 'secrets known to everyone'. These communities often operate within legal and extralegal spheres, further complicating direct engagement by outsiders, including researchers.

A seemingly minor yet illustrative news report underscores the power dynamics surrounding these religious communities: According to a news report published in newspapers April 2024, police officers who spotted hundreds of immigrants in a mosque affiliated with the *İsmailağa* community were reportedly dismissed and reassigned to another position after being accused of "hallucinating" (Tele1, 16.04.2024).This incident demonstrates the power of Islamic communities in bureaucracy and politics.

This study has been the most time-intensive research endeavor I have conducted to date. However, this slow-paced approach has proven to be methodologically necessary, allowing for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding access to Islamic communities.

Fatih, Istanbul: A place for multiple solidarities

Fatih is popularly regarded as "the place of Islamists". This symbolic status positions it as a bastion of tradition and religious identity, often imagined in contrast to the secularizing and Westernizing trajectory pursued by the modern Turkish Republic. Peyami Safa's (2002) *Fatih-*

Harbiye, originally published in 1931 and one of the most significant novels in Turkish literature, explores the themes of Westernization, shifting social values, and morality in Turkey through the story of a young woman. In this novel, Fatih represents the past, conservative values, and traditional morality, while Harbiye[2] stands for Westernization, non-Muslim influences, and modern values and spaces. However, the district is a vast and heterogeneous one that brings together a wide range of social groups—including Islamists, Roma communities, migrants, and others—while also encompassing some of Istanbul's most iconic touristic landmarks, such as the Hagia Sophia and the Sultan Ahmed Mosque.

Map of Fatih neighborhood

It is crucial to underscore that Fatih encompasses a vast territorial expanse and is marked by significant socio-spatial heterogeneity. This heterogeneity was deeply intertwined with broader social, economic, and political transformations. Before the 1980s, the vicinity of the Golden Horn (Haliç) provided employment opportunities for internal migrants coming to the city due to the presence of industrial facilities. Workers in these factories typically settled in nearby areas within the district. Following the decline of large industries in the late 1980s, only small businesses remained (Şentürk, 2011). During this period, the new residents of Istanbul, migrants from all regions of Anatolia, established solidarity networks primarily based on *hemşehrilik*. In addition to the deindustrialization of the central city that contributed to the increased spread of religious networks in Fatih, Özet (2019) argues that the dismantling of

[2] Harbiye is a district now located within the Şişli municipality. It symbolizes the northward shift of the Westernized elements of Ottoman society—predominantly non-Muslims and Levantines—from the Galata-Pera region. For detailed information see Danış and Kayaalp, 2014.

leftist paradigms and relations inherited from the 1970s by the liberalization of the 1980s, along with the crisis of nationalist-conservative identity based on *hemşehrilik*, opened up space for Islamic networks. "The increasingly complex structure of Fatih was leading established conservatives towards purely-Islamic movements that seemed more functional and inclusive" (ibid, p.94). On the other hand, with the Islamic awakening, the growing wealth of the Islamic milieu, fueled by the functioning of religion as a 'network resource' (Buğra and Savaşkan, 2014) and Islamic capital has become significant force (Tuğal, 2002) , and the steady strengthening of Islamist politics since the late 1990s has led to the establishment of various institutions that embrace Islamic values, goals, and methods: NGOs, media outlets, foundations, and countless schools, dormitories, and courses. All these institutions have also become centers for solidarity, and through solidarity, for growth and expansion of Islamic circles. The networks of mutual exchange that emerged with the rise of political Islam helped create the economic basis for the growth of religiously motivated associations (Göçmen, 2014).

Nonetheless, in popular perception, Fatih often signifies not the administrative boundaries of the district per se, but rather a sociocultural space predominantly affiliated with pious Muslims and religious communities affiliated with various tariqas[3]. Islamic communities have wielded varying degrees and forms of power throughout Turkey's history. A significant number of influential figures in business and politics, including industrialists, members of parliament, and ministers, have roots in or ties to these communities (Çakır, 2017). The communities often congregate around specific mosques, which serve as both religious and social hubs. For instance, while both the *İsmailağa* and *İskenderpaşa* communities are affiliated with the Naqshbandi tariqa, they are centered around different mosques—Fatih Mosque and İskenderpaşa Mosque, respectively. Surrounding these mosques are bookstores specializing in religious literature, shops selling Islamic attire, and businesses run by community-affiliated tradespeople.

Fatih is also partaking in the broader transformation of Istanbul, inevitably. Even the more conservative segments of Fatih have not remained untouched by profound change. As Abdel pointed out during the field research, especially in the areas where more members of fundamentalist religious communities lived, it was once nearly impossible to navigate the streets for a man who did not dress in accordance with the rules of fundamentalist Islam let alone for a woman without wearing hijab.

I sat [spent time] in Çarşamba [neighborhood] for the first time. For example, I was going to İsmailağa [community], I was wearing an outfit like that. They look at me in such a way.. I mean an infidel. For example, a woman may be wearing a headscarf but not a chador, they look at you, who are you? [Abdel, Syrian, activist]

However, today, both women and men can move freely throughout almost the entire district. Henkel (2007, p. 58) contends that the division which, some two decades ago, marked Fatih as

[3] Tariqa means the Sufi doctrine or path of spiritual learning.

a distinct Muslim territory and set it apart from other parts of the city, is no longer a territorial divide.

Undoubtedly, the socio-economic transformations that have shaped Turkey since its inception, coupled with the critical economic and political ruptures of the 1980s and 2000s, have left a profound imprint on areas such as Fatih and its residents. In the context of this study, when narrowing the focus to groups self-identifying as pious, one can discern the spatial ramifications of these economic shifts. Since the 1990s, the upward mobility of the pious upper and middle classes has been accompanied by a discernible shift toward newly developed gated communities—residential enclaves widely perceived as the preferred living spaces for devout Muslims (Çavdar, 2016). Compounding this trend, the persistent anxiety surrounding a potentially catastrophic earthquake in Istanbul has further intensified the relocation to areas perceived as offering enhanced safety, structural durability, and the promise of modern, earthquake-resistant urban development. The outmigration of long-term residents from Fatih has given rise to patterns of secondary occupancy, with the vacated housing stock increasingly inhabited by university students, economically disadvantaged individuals unable—or in some cases unwilling—to relocate to newer and more secure buildings, and various migrant populations.

As mentioned above, Fatih has very popular touristic parts. However, in addition to those historical monuments and surroundings certain parts of the district has become touristic residential area- not only the hotels but also short/mid-term rental houses. These accommodation options mostly taken by mostly tourists from Gulf countries.

Photo above on the left, source: https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/al-istanbul-how-turkeys-largest-city-became-a-hub-for-arab-tourists-87876

Photo on the right, source: https://www.yenisafak.com/hayat/arap-modasinin-adresi-fatih-3384005

The caption on the photograph reads The address for Arab fashion: Fatih

Photo below: Uğur Şahin

Source: https://ugur-sahin.medium.com/dokunulmayan-cemaatten-dokunulan-semte-841f9e37ad11

Last but not least, factor that is important to understand the transformation of the district is the migratory flows. Before the arrival of Syrian refugees, the Laleli-Kumkapı axis (both neighborhoods within Fatih) was more commonly associated with migrants. Laleli, has emerged since the 1990s as a key hub for small and medium-scale textile production and transnational suitcase trade, becoming deeply embedded in broader circuits of the global informal economy (Yükseker, 2003). Just downstream from Laleli lies Kumkapı, which has served as a primary site of settlement for incoming international migrants. Once home to non-Muslim communities and their religious and civic institutions until the mid-20th century, Kumkapı has since undergone a significant demographic transformation, evolving into a densely populated neighborhood inhabited by migrants of diverse national origins and legal statuses. This spatial and historical continuity has, perhaps inevitably, rendered the area a terrain of both solidarity and contestation among migrant and non-migrant communities (Biehl, 2018; Körükmez, 2012).

Fatih is one of the districts in Istanbul where Syrians refugees have densely settled. While the AKP's 'Muslim brotherhood' discourse initially fostered greater social acceptance (Kaya, 2020; Karakaya Polat, 2018), particularly among the devout, this discourse began to lose its influence with the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment. Throughout this process, Fatih was portrayed in the media as one of the areas 'Arabized' by Syrians. Over time, in addition to the Syrians in the district, Afghans and refugees from other countries also became subjects of controversy in public discussions.

While there is a spatial separation between migrant and non-migrant residential areas in the district, there also exists a spatial clustering of different migrant groups based on their countries of origin. Mahmut, who also raised in Fatih describes the scene:

Actually, there are already lots of rundown places… think of the city walls… places like Kadınlar Pazarı, At Pazarı, and towards the Fatih Mosque. … you enter the neighborhoods where the old residents of Fatih live… Around Fındıkzade, there are a lot of Somalis. On the other side, there are Africans doing trade, especially cargo trade. Deeper inside, you see more Francophones. Then as you head towards Samatya, you start seeing more Congolese people. Eventually, when you reach the end of the city wall and the coastline, you're in Yedikule. From Yedikule all the way to Kumkapı, there are lots of migrants living there. These areas are already run-down, and you can still see the architecture from when Armenians and Levantines used to live there. Because the rents are cheap, migrants can still find places to live along that coastal strip between Yedikule and Kumkapı… around the city walls, it's more open to migrants, whereas the inner areas are more for locals. [Mahmut, Turkish, activist]

Following the arrival of Syrians, numerous NGOs in Turkey have broadened their operations to encompass migrant populations. Both formal and informal organizations rooted in Islamic faith are not exempt from this trend. Religiously motivated segment of civil society, which began to grow in the 1990s and have become significantly wealthier and more powerful since the 2000s (Atasoy, 2019; Sevinin, 2022), have played a crucial role in the acceptance of

refugees. Additionally, it is not just formal and informal civil society organizations, but also the everyday acts of solidarity and support by ordinary individuals, that have been observed.

In addition to the sporadic acts of solidarity by civil society organizations and individuals, Fatih provides a diverse array of opportunities for migrants in terms of housing and employment. While more affluent migrants and tourists benefit from shopping and accommodation facilities, just around the corner, the living and working spaces of impoverished and undocumented refugees can be found. The residential, commercial, and everyday spaces inhabited or frequented by tourists, migrants, and non-migrant populations from diverse backgrounds in Fatih are spatially distinct, reflecting a broader pattern of urban segregation shaped by socio-economic status, legal precarity, and patterns of mobility.

Institutionalization of civil society and expansion to refugee support

The institutionalization of Islamic civil society in Turkey, which took root in the 1990s, was further shaped by the AKP's neoliberal restructuring of state-society relations in the 2000s. This process not only facilitated the articulation of Islamic frameworks for problematizing social issues and reinforcing faith-based solidarity but also enabled the proliferation of state–civil society assemblages oriented toward the production of social capital, political connectivity, and moral communities (Sevinin, 2022: 130). The Islamic civil society segment providing humanitarian aid, advocacy, or other forms of support to refugees in Turkey has largely developed within this framework.

Sabriye, a woman in her fifties, offered a brief yet insightful account of how she began volunteering in the field of asylum, which also reflects the broader transformation of faith-based civil society in Turkey. Recalling her earlier years, she explained that as a young woman active in the women's branch of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi)—a political actor that shared power in the 1990s—she was encouraged by her elders to also volunteer with IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İnsani Yardım Vakfı- IHH), a newly established humanitarian organization at the time. "I don't know how it is in your circles, but in ours, if something is asked of you, you do it," she remarked, hinting at the hierarchical and duty-bound nature of organizational engagement. On its official website, IHH describes itself as follows:

The Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) was officially established in 1995 and is an independent, non-profit, Türkiye-based non-governmental organization that carries out humanitarian aid work on a local and international scale and bases its existence on national and international legislation, as stated in the foundation's charter." (İHH, 2025)

As stated on its official website, IHH has grown into a major humanitarian organization that delivers aid both locally and internationally. Over time, the organization has expanded its scope beyond conventional civil society activities, taking on a mediating role within what it refers to as "humanitarian diplomacy.

For instance, as a member of the Third Party Monitoring Team (TPMT), the IHH has played a crucial role in the peace negotiations between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which were initiated to end the decades-long conflict in the country. In another example, the IHH has upheld arbitration and mediation roles between warring parties and in the release of civilians imprisoned in Syria…the release of two Czech women kidnapped by an al-Qaeda-linked armed group… (Insight Turkey, 2015).

In line with the narrative presented on the IHH's official website, Sabriye explained that she began working in the field of asylum as a member of a volunteer team initially formed to support those fleeing the Bosnian War in 1992. She emphasized the initial motivation of aiding her Muslim brothers and sisters from Bosnia. Over time, however, this mission expanded to include assistance to all refugees—regardless of origin—as well as to broader populations in need. Sabriye noted that she withdrew from both political and humanitarian work in 2010. Yet, about a year ago, at the request of her senior figures—whom she respectfully referred to as *büyüklerimiz*[4]—she re-engaged in the field, this time through her involvement with the Migration and Diaspora Association, an organization known for its strong ties to the AKP.

Seçkin, chairman of the board of Özgür-Der and interlocutor stated that, similar to many other organizations in Turkey, their engagement with issues of migration and asylum began primarily in response to the increasing number of refugees and the growing scope of humanitarian needs. Despite this involvement, Özgür-Der identifies itself not as a humanitarian aid provider but as a human rights organization. Established in the 1999 during the period of headscarf bans in Turkish universities, the organization initially emerged as part of the broader resistance to restrictions on religious freedoms. As Seçkin explains, the association was founded in the aftermath of the February 28[5] process, specifically "following the effective curtailment of street mobilization," referring to the diminishing role of public protest in challenging the headscarf ban and related restrictions. Our interview took place in a room adorned with a large painting depicting this formative struggle, symbolizing the organization's roots in faith-based rights advocacy. Seçkin states that the association is addressing human rights violations occurring at both the national and international levels.

[4] The most common and direct translation of "büyüklerimiz" is "our elders." However, in the context in which Sabriya uses the term, it conveys more than just age; it implies respected authority figures and evokes a broader sense of social hierarchy, the sources of which can be diverse— ranging from religious and political to communal or familial authority.

[5] 1997 Turkish military memorandum. "[The] rise of the Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, or RP) from fringe party to a major partner in the coalition government, Refahyol, it formed with the center right True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi, or DYP) in June 1996. With the benefit of hindsight, one might suggest that the Turkish military took the accession of the RP into government as confirmation of its belief that Islamist reactionism, irtica in Turkish, had become a substantial threat to the secular character of the republic. Consequently, on February 28, the military-dominated National Security Council (NSC) issued the Refahyol coalition government with a list of measures designed to nullify the supposed Islamization of Turkey and fortify the secular system. Subsequent pressure from the NSC, in tandem with the civilian component of the secular establishment, led to the collapse of the coalition government in June" (Cizre-Sakallioglu and Çınar, 2003). The decisions announced following the National Security Council meeting on February 28, 1997, did not involve a direct takeover of the government but instead forced the government to resign through the media.

In the context of asylum and refugee issues, the association operates not on the basis of universal human rights norms, but rather through a belief-driven vision of a livable society, which entails a distinction between groups perceived as deserving or undeserving of support. Mostly those who are here due to political circumstances, people who are in trouble because of their beliefs, or those who would not be able to live or remain in their country of origin. For instance, we view Syria and Uzbekistan in this sense — people fleeing from there. But frankly, we don't see Afghanistan as a country where people would be entirely unable to live. (Seçkin, activist, Özgür-Der)

The activities outlined on the association's website, alongside statements made by its members in various provinces across Turkey and in international contexts, offer a clear reflection of the ideological stance expressed by Seçkin. A striking example can be found in a meeting held in Batman, a city that became emblematic of Islamic communities affiliated with religious orders following the 1980s. During this gathering, a member of Özgür-Der delivered a speech titled "Islamic Principles in Social Relations," which not only encapsulated the association's vision for the societal framework it seeks to cultivate but also illustrated how refugees are situated within this framework. The discourse revealed the association's approach to social relations, which emphasizes Islamic principles, while simultaneously highlighting how refugees are incorporated—or potentially marginalized—within the broader social structure they envision. He

Moving away from nationalist sentiment that sees migrants through the lens of *muhacir* and carrying the concept of Muslim brotherhood to future generations. (Özgür-Der, 2020)

Özgür-Der does not receive any funding but rely on donations from, in Seçkin's words "a community that is with us for a long time". The association, although being a human rights advocacy organization, provides aid for groups in need.

We don't really have a structured aid program, but we try to meet the requests that come to us as best as we can, with the people around us. (Seçkin, activist, Özgür-Der)

Despite Seçkin's modest descriptions, the organization's website reveals a range of activities, albeit not in large numbers, often in collaboration with other Islamic organizations. These include projects such as building mosques and educational centers in Chad, as well as distributing sacrificial offerings in Afghanistan and Syria.

Mazlum-Der, another significant NGO with an Islamic orientation also functions as a human rights organization, established in 1991. The 'original' Mazlum-Der, which in earlier years collaborated with non-Islamic human rights organizations—describing their alliance with the leftist Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği-İHD) as "melting together in the crucible of oppression")—had, by the 2010s, largely disbanded. What remained was an organization that had, to a significant extent, taken on the characteristics of a GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization) (Toker Kılıç et al., 2021).

The 'new' Mazlum-Der is also selective in its engagement with refugee-related issues. Özgür, one of the board members in Istanbul, identifies himself as 'radical Islamist[6]' who, for example, rejects to vote. Mazlum-Der provides legal help to refugees as well as connects refugees in humanitarian need and organizations providing help. According to Özgür, Mazlum-Der does not differentiate between Muslim and non-Muslim refugees, but due to the networks formed as a result of their work following the arrival of Syrian refugees in Turkey, most of the refugees they are in contact with are Syrian. Also, according to him, most of the people from Africa stay in Istanbul shortly so they do not need to be in touch with Mazlum-Der. Also, Mazlum-Der prepares observation reports on refugee related issues.

Despite the association's monitoring reports, Özgür, a board member of Mazlum-Der, stated—both during our interview and in public appearances—that human rights violations related to the Directorate General of Migration Management, removal centers, and other relevant institutions were not the result of systemic issues within these bodies. Rather, he framed them as isolated incidents stemming from the actions of individual public officials.

Fatih can be conceptualized as an "urban space of solidarity" (Arampatzi, 2017) grounded in Islamic religious belief. This space also represents a context in which the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups in solidarity (García Agustín and Jørgensen, 2021) with refugees are at times blurred, transcended, or reconstituted. In the following section, I examine how religion functions as a key axis in shaping the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within practices of solidarity.

Selective Inclusion at the Nexus of Theology and Politics

Migration process influences and transforms the beliefs, practices, and community formation of migrants, has an impact on non-migrants, and affects religious landscape (Frederiks, 2015). In migratory contexts, religious beliefs, texts, narratives, and practices not only inform and structure the lived experiences of migrants (Saunders et all, 2016: 10) but are themselves subject to reinterpretation and transformation through the processes of displacement and resettlement; narratives of migration found in religious texts can serve as meaningful frameworks through which migrants may interpret and situate their own journeys (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 19). By reflecting on the experiences of earlier adherents who practiced their faith in conditions of mobility, migrants may come to recognize a sense of sacred continuity within their own displacement and movement (ibid, 2016).

Moreover, migration flows have the potential to change the religious and faith landscape in receiving countries. For example, Bava (2016) shows in her study that the accumulation of migrants in Morocco with the rise of Europe's borders led to the revival of Protestant and Catholic churches for the first time since colonial times and even to the formation of a 'theology of migration'. In Europe and North America, the establishment of new places of worship and the creation of faith-based institutions and networks by immigrants, while seemingly a

[6] Radical Islamist in this context way different than connotation present in Western countries.

response to marginalization, has also sparked public debate, and even death of multiculturalism. Although debates about religion—more precisely, the religion of migrants—and its role in coexistence, integration, and the future of societies have been ongoing for many years (Conor, 2016; Ahsan Ullah, AHuque, and Kathy, 2022), the so-called refugee crisis has also witnessed instances of cross-religious encounters and interreligious dialogue (*Ralston, 2017*). At the same time, theological discussions have been revitalized within Christianity (Phan, 2016, Swamy, 2017). A similar debate can also be observed within Islam (Saritoprak, 2017; Barzegar, 2020).

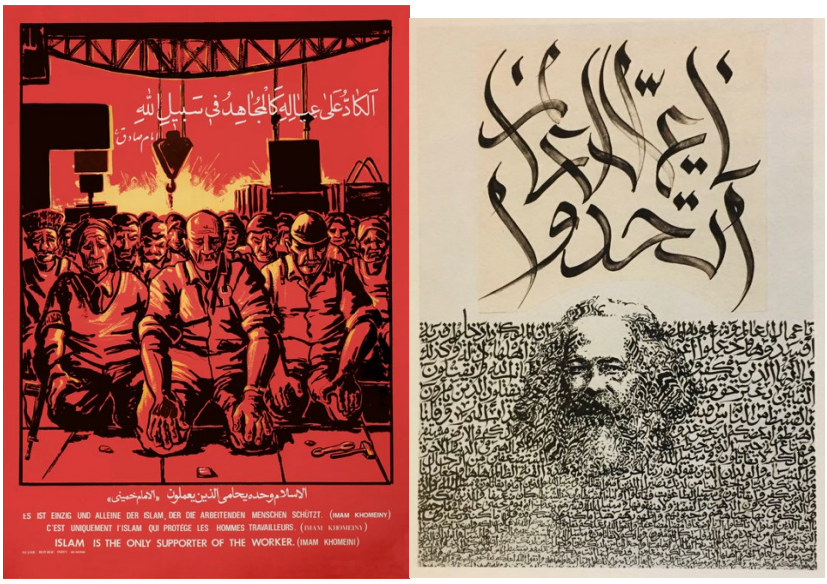
In the context of Istanbul—where different shades and tones of Islam intersect with refugees from all around the world sharing a common physical space—it was intriguing to observe the theological, ethical, and practical "lived" forms of Islam and the related discussions on these topics. Sınırsız Dayanışma (Borderless Solidarity), which formed the starting point of this research, is also a space where both migrant and non-migrant individuals, each positioned within different interpretations of Islam, come together. Among them are individuals active in the human rights movement who define themselves as "radical Islamists" and have written books and articles about Islam and asylum (one of whom was interviewed for this research), Syrians under temporary protection or who have acquired citizenship, anti-capitalist Muslims, individuals who do not identify with Islam but describe themselves as anti-capitalist leftists, and Kurds with Islamic beliefs—altogether constitute a wide variety of profiles. The ways in which Islam and refugeehood are discussed within this diversity was particularly interesting.

In one of the gatherings held at the association—described as "a heartfelt conversation conducted in a circle of equals and face-to-face, especially with our friends of different nationalities, primarily Syrians" (Sınırsız Dayanışma, 2024)—a Syrian university student with Turkish citizenship recounted a racist incident he had experienced and added, "But now, we are Turkish too." One of the participants immediately intervened. This person, Savaş, who owns a publishing house that produces Islamic publications and is one of the founders of an political party with an Islamic ideological orientation, said:

"God created us as nations. An Arab is Arab, a Turk is Turk. But saying *Türkiyeli*[7] is more appropriate. We don't want our struggle to benefit racists. There is an overarching identity for Muslims—some might be Christian, etc.—but for those who have come here, 'from Turkey' is a more correct term." (Savaş, activist, writer)

Below, you can see two of the images displayed on the walls of the Sınırsız Dayanışma Association. In addition to these, other visuals on the walls include a "Support Your Local Antifa" poster, a movie poster of Mandabi, and a portrait of Frantz Fanon.

[7] The debate over whether citizens of Turkey should be referred to as "Turk" (*Türk*) or "from Turkey" (*Türkiyeli*) has long been a subject of public discussion in the country. Those who argue against the term *Türk* claim that it refers to a specific ethnic identity, and instead advocate for terms such as *Türkiyeli*, which can be roughly translated as "from Turkey" or "citizen of Turkey." This argument is especially popular among Kurds and opponents of nationalism. At times, the term "citizen of Turkey" (*Türkiye vatandaşı*) is also used as an alternative to *Türkiyeli*.



Images on the walls of *Sınırsız Dayanışma*

This community, which fosters solidarity with refugees through the frameworks of both Marxism and Islam, also engages in theological debates on asylum and refugeehood within various interpretations of Islamic thought. According to Sarikaya, who discusses migration and feelings of belonging to a land in the Islamic tradition, in Islam, the entire world belongs to God and as a hadith says, 'God has made the entire face of the earth as a mosque for me and its soil as pure,'" highlighting the idea that all land is inherently sacred and open to believers (Saritoprak, 2015: 49).

That said, anti-capitalist Muslims represent only a small minority within the broader sociopolitical landscape of Fatih. Sabriye, who has maintained long-standing ties with the internationally operating IHH and has at times actively participated in its activities, offers a narrative that aligns with broader religiously grounded discourses on solidarity. Yet her account also reveals the tension between Islamic theological imperatives and shifting political sentiments. Despite the Quranic emphasis on aiding those in need and the emphasis in Islamic tradition on the formation of the earliest Muslim community—particularly the establishment of brotherhood (*muakhat*) based on the relationship between the *Muhajirun* (migrants) and the *Ansar* (helpers) after the migration to Medina, Sabriye observes a growing reluctance to support refugees, shaped by broader socio-political dynamics. She highlights increasing challenges in mobilizing humanitarian aid for refugee populations, noting that IHH donors are often allowed to stipulate who should benefit from their contributions. In recent years, these donor-imposed restrictions—particularly those that exclude refugees—have significantly hindered the organization's ability to channel resources toward displaced populations.

Despite their foundational role in Islamic teachings as mechanisms for redistributing wealth to the most vulnerable, *zakat* and *fitrah* are increasingly being administered in ways that exclude refugees—revealing a growing disjuncture between theological principles of universal compassion and the politicized boundaries of communal belonging. As noted by interviewees Abdel and Mahmut, many Islamic humanitarian organizations tend to channel their efforts not

toward refugees currently residing in Turkey, but rather toward religiously sanctioned practices—such as the distribution of *zakat* and *fitrah*, the ritual slaughter and distribution of meat during Eid al-Adha, and the construction of water wells—in the refugees' countries of origin. This tendency reflects a spatial and symbolic distancing from local refugee populations and a preference for transnational forms of charity that align with traditional conceptions of benevolence. The prominence of such practices is further evidenced by the prevalence of visual representations of aid activities in African countries on the websites of these organizations.

The reorientation from locally grounded, neighbor-based solidarity toward transnational humanitarian activity reveals two intertwined modes of politicization. First, it reflects a growing societal resistance to living alongside refugees and migrants—an unwillingness that, in some instances, escalates into physical violence and pogrom-like attacks. This exclusionary turn marks not only a breakdown of immediate, spatially shared solidarity, but also the drawing of moral boundaries around who is deemed worthy of care and inclusion within the national space. Second, this shift corresponds to the long-standing efforts of Turkey's political Islamic actors to expand their influence abroad through religiously framed aid, particularly in Muslim-majority regions of Africa, where transnational humanitarianism has become a central vehicle of soft power projection.

Beyond formal aid activities, everyday experiences of solidarity reveal how horizontal forms of mutual support can become disrupted within religious practices. In Mahmut's words:

I mean, Turkish people aren't really open to such things. I've heard that they often feel uncomfortable even when [Africans] enter the mosque—because they already see them as dirty. I've heard many such stories. Like, someone goes to the mosque for Friday prayer, stands in the prayer line, and the person next to them moves away or tries to stand somewhere else. I must have heard stories like that at least ten times. I'm speaking about Africans here. I don't really know about stories involving Syrians, but in general, the stories I've heard from people reflect this discomfort among Turks. They often say they feel uneasy because of hygiene-related concerns. And secondly, when you talk to a Turk about religion, they tend to act like a big brother, and that really bothers people. (Mahmut, activist)

Abdel continuous:

Like, for example, he goes to the mosque—sometimes barefoot. And then people say things like, "Don't come in barefoot," or something like that. (Abdel, Syrian, activist)

Abdel also reflects on how both citizens and non-citizens, including Syrians, participate in religious practices within mosques, highlighting the subtle yet significant distinctions in how their presence and engagement are perceived. His observations point to a hierarchy of belonging that emerges even in ostensibly inclusive religious spaces, where shared faith does not necessarily translate into equal treatment or full inclusion in communal worship.

Abdel further explains how mosques affiliated with various Islamic communities, as well as the imams serving in them, approach refugees and relate to their presence and participation.

For example, Yavuz Selim Mosque is affiliated with Mahmud Efendi's community—its imam as well. So what do they do? They designate specific days for certain activities or "processes," as

they call them. Because of that, they offer Qur'an courses, but only for a limited time or in a structured way. This kind of relationship forms wherever there's a Syrian presence. The same applies to Mesih Ali Pasha Mosque. For instance, there's a lesson that is only for refugees after evening prayer on a certain day. on a certain day after the evening prayer, there's a lesson given just for refugees. That's the only time something like this happens. (Abdel, Syrian, activist)

Abdel also reflects on relations of non-Syrians' experiences in mosques.

I went there once, for example. There were even Uzbek children—not just Syrians or Arabs. They might be Muslims, they might even be citizens. But still, the local congregations don't treat them as equals. There's this attitude, like: "We, out of kindness, have given you this space. You are guests here." That dynamic is definitely present. Of course, such places do exist. And similarly, there are aid associations, umbrella organizations that operate in the same way. That's what I observe. (Abdel, Syrian, activist)

Mahmut offers a comparison between how Christian and Muslim migrants utilize religious spaces, highlighting differences in access, inclusion, and communal dynamics.

Christian communities—such as Ethiopians—make use of religious spaces as well. For instance, they use the Armenian church in Kumkapı. This is because the Ethiopian and Armenian churches are historically connected as sister churches. During the time of the Armenian genocide, Ethiopia is said to have offered protection to Armenian refugees. Because of this shared history, there is a lasting bond among churches in Lebanon, Turkey, and Ethiopia. As a result, Ethiopian migrants have been able to access that church space. Among Muslim migrants, there are also examples of community religious practice—such as among Senegalese groups. At one time, their gatherings were quite visible and well-received locally. The Esenler Municipality used to provide its sports hall every year for their major religious events. These included large-scale Sufi ceremonies. These practices continue today, but now they are held in privately rented venues—such as wedding halls—rather than in mosques. (Mahmut, activist)

While Christian migrants may draw on transnational church networks that facilitate their integration into existing religious infrastructures, Muslim migrants often find themselves navigating limited inclusion within local mosque communities, turning instead to alternative, non-mosque spaces to sustain their collective religious practices. This differentiation shows, in urban Turkey, where shared belief does not necessarily translate into equal religious I attended a religious gathering of Senegalese Mourides in Fatih, held in a venue originally designed for weddings. Notably, the event took place in close proximity to numerous mosques, yet outside of those formal religious spaces.

Generative Narrative Workshop: ***Elhamdülillah Village***

GNW was carried out in collaboration with the Sınırsız Dayanışma Association. Designed as a participatory and reflective exercise, the workshop invited participants to imagine their lives as a book and to propose a title for that book. This creative prompt served as an entry point for discussing personal histories, aspirations, and the ways in which individuals narrate their own migration journeys.

The participants were refugees who had long been known to members of the Unlimited Solidarity Association. While some participants were friends and neighbors, they were not all acquainted with one another; my own introduction to the group occurred during the workshop. Nevertheless, group interaction evolved rapidly throughout the workshop, as participants commented on one another's work, offered suggestions on material usage, exchanged jokes, and frequently shared resources.

Eight participants—three of whom were men—began by introducing themselves and reflecting on the possible title of their life story. Their responses captured a range of ambitions, identities, and imagined futures. For instance, Akiki, a Ugandan who came to Turkey to pursue a career in football, chose the title *A Life of A Luta Continua*, referencing a popular slogan of resistance. Noor selected *How to Become a Great Cook*, centering her experience and aspirations around care work and culinary skill. Axado, a Somali woman, chose *To Become a Powerful Businesswoman*, highlighting her entrepreneurial goals and future-oriented self-perception.

In the second stage of the workshop, participants engaged in a creative exercise guided by a local artist known for producing visual artworks using recycled materials and for facilitating community-based art workshops. Drawing on participatory, arts-based methodology this phase encouraged participants to design book covers corresponding to the life narratives they had previously shared. Although most participants had little to no experience with visual art or creative expression, the process was shaped by peer support and the artist's accessible, process-oriented guidance. The act of making—cutting, drawing, composing—served not only as a means of artistic exploration but also as a collective space for reflection and affirmation.

By creating visual representations of their life stories, participants reclaimed authorship over their identities and futures, illustrating how artistic methods can offer alternative channels for migrant self-representation beyond institutional narratives, bureaucratic categories or even academic narratives. This stage of the workshop thus underscored the empowering potential of collaborative artistic practice in contexts of displacement and marginalization.

Although all of the book covers reflected elements of the refugee experience—such as retrospective reflections on the past and aspirations for the future—one stood out for its explicit emphasis on the theme of solidarity. Titled *Elhamdülillah Village. T*he use of the phrase *Elhamdülillah* (an Arabic expression meaning "praise be to God") not only signifies spiritual endurance but also gestures toward a shared Islamic vocabulary through which many participants frame their experiences of hardship and mutual support.

Throughout the workshop, Madaline, the creator of the book cover, introduced herself as a community social worker and spoke repeatedly about 'serving the community'.
The image represents not only a dream of settlement, but also an ethic of communal living. A dream of a collective life woven with faith, where cooperation, acquaintance and mutual responsibility are intertwined... Therefore, Elhamdülillah Village reveals an alternative community imagination against the world where migrants are marginalized.
The settlement structure in the image - houses surrounded by structures such as mosques, hospitals, schools, markets, pharmacies - represents a village life. These structures form the infrastructure for living together, reflecting a functional network of solidarity between members of the community. The emphasis on common spaces accessible to all indicates that solidarity is built on spatial equality.
Throughout the workshop, Madaline introduced herself as a community social worker and spoke repeatedly about 'serving the community'. Madaline has retained the names based on real stories of solidarity, reflecting the personal ties of the community and the emotional and social solidarity between people who know each other rather than an anonymous mass. Madaline then recalled and joked a lot about her memories of solidarity while explaining the book cover.
The expression “ALLAHAMDULILLAH,” written in capital letters at both the top and bottom of the image, underscores a sense of gratitude and a faith-based sense of belonging. It serves not only as an expression of individual thankfulness, but also as a collective affirmation of peace and coexistence within a divine framework.

Conclusion

This report draws on fieldwork conducted in the Fatih district of Istanbul to examine the multifaceted nature of solidarity practices developed by Islamic communities in relation to refugees. While the research shows that religious beliefs and Islamic references play a central role in legitimizing assistance to refugees, it also reveals that such forms of solidarity are not always inclusive or egalitarian. It became evident that the attitudes of both individuals and institutions within faith-based communities—although shaped by religious discourse—are deeply entangled with political, economic, and cultural dynamics.
The study offers original findings that demonstrate how religious motivations can both enable solidarity and reproduce boundaries. The state-promoted discourse of “Islamic brotherhood” played a key role in legitimizing the initial reception of Syrian refugees. However, this acceptance often remained within the limits of tolerance, producing a form of solidarity that was far from egalitarian and in which boundaries were maintained and re-inscribed. While theological sources emphasize universal solidarity, in practice, support structures often become hierarchical, shaped by religious, ethnic, or political affiliations. Indeed, as the findings show, a shared religious identity does not necessarily ensure equal access or a genuine sense of belonging within mosque communities or Islamic spaces.

Moreover, Islamic actors in Turkey—who possess significant organizational capacity—appear to have gradually shifted from face-to-face, community-based models of solidarity to more distant, donor-driven forms of humanitarian aid abroad. This shift has negatively impacted both the visibility and sustainability of refugee solidarity on the ground. Aid practices that are detached from local contexts and dependent on donor preferences hinder the formation of meaningful social ties between refugees and host communities who share the same urban space.

Overall, the findings suggest that faith-based solidarity is far more complex than it may initially appear. Only through a critical lens can such practices contribute to the rights-based social inclusion of refugees, rather than reinforcing unequal structures of support and belonging.

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Appendix I

Interviews and GNW participants

Hoca	Male	Doctor, activist	Turkish	Consent to share the interview Excerpt
Özgür	Male	Human rights defender, writer	Turkish	Consent to share the interview Excerpt
Savaş	Male	Activist, writer	Turkish	Consent to share the interview Excerpt
Saw	Male	Worker	Senegal	Consent to share the interview Excerpt
Seçkin	Male	Chairman of the Board of Özgür-Der	Turkish	Consent to share the interview Excerpt
Mahmud	Male	Activist	Turkish	Consent to share the interview Excerpt
Abdel	Male	Activist	Syria	Consent to share the interview Excerpt
Sabriye	Female	Activist	Turkish	Consent to share the interview Excerpt
Mariam	Female	Restaurant worker	Siera Leona	Consent to share the interview Excerpt and images she drew
Nafuna	Female	Domestic worker	Uganda	Consent to share the interview Excerpt and images she drew
Natale	Female	Domestic worker	Uganda	Consent to share the interview Excerpt and images she drew
Jendyose	Female	Domestic worker	Uganda	Consent to share the interview Excerpt and images she drew
Kissa	Female	Domestic worker	Uganda	Consent to share the interview Excerpt and images she drew
Faruk	Male	Unemployed	Somali	Consent to share the interview Excerpt and images she drew
Barre	Male	NGO employee	Somali	Consent to share the interview Excerpt and images she drew
Golibe	Male	Football coach/pastor/unemployed	Nageria	Consent to share the interview Excerpt and images she drew

Appendix II

Elhamdülillah village drawn by from Sierra Leone

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