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ONTOLOGICAL (IN) SECURITY AND MUTUAL RECOGNITION IN TÜRKİYE: INSIGHTS FROM NATURALIZED SYRIANS AND TURKISH CITIZENS[*]

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Abstract

This study examines mutual ontological (in)security between naturalized Syrians and native Turkish citizens. Based on the ontological security framework, it investigates how naturalized Syrians construct, perceive, and negotiate their sense of belonging (legal status and socio-emotional ties), identity, and recognition after naturalization, while also examining how native Turkish citizens perceive and interpret this newly naturalized group. Conducted using mixed methods, it combines semi-structured interviews with naturalized Syrians and two structured surveys targeting both groups. The findings reveal that while legal citizenship provides institutional access and official rights, it does not automatically guarantee emotional or symbolic belonging. Many participants report continued experiences of conditional acceptance and social exclusion even after naturalization. In contrast, many Turkish participants express concerns about cultural erosion, national unity, and the legitimacy of the naturalized population. Rather than presenting definitive conclusions, the study highlights areas of tension, partial recognition, and emotional dissonance. The analysis, structured around five thematic dimensions (anxiety, narrative, routine, space, and belonging), provides preliminary insights into how citizenship is experienced by immigrants and host communities after naturalization. The article is based on pilot data from a larger research project funded by TÜBİTAK 1001 (Scientific and Technological Research Projects Support Program), which also contributes to a PhD thesis conducted by the authors in a candidate–advisor collaboration. As a pilot study, the findings are not generalizable but offer initial insights into how legal inclusion interacts with emotional and social dimensions of belonging in post-naturalization contexts.

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TÜRKİYE'DE ONTOLOJİK GÜVENLİK/ GÜVENSİZLİK VE KARŞILIKLI TANIMA: VATANDAŞLIĞA ALINMIŞ SURİYELİLER VE TÜRK VATANDAŞLARINDAN ÖĞRENİLENLER

Öz

Bu çalışma, vatandaşlığa kabul edilen Suriyeliler ile yerli Türk vatandaşları arasındaki karşılıklı ontolojik güvenlik/güvensizlik durumunu incelemektedir. Ontolojik güvenlik kuramsal çerçevesine dayanan araştırma, vatandaşlığa kabul edilen Suriyelilerin vatandaşlıktan sonra aidiyet duygularını (yasal statü ve sosyo-duygusal bağlar), kimliklerini ve tanınma biçimlerini nasıl inşa ettiklerini, algıladıklarını ve müzakere ettiklerini; aynı zamanda yerli Türk vatandaşlarının da bu yeni vatandaş grubunun varlığını ve tanınırlığını nasıl algıladıklarını ve yorumladıklarını incelemektedir. Karma yöntem kullanılarak yürütülen çalışma, vatandaşlığa kabul edilen Suriyelilerle yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler ile her iki grubu hedefleyen iki yapılandırılmış anketin bulgularını birleştirmektedir. Bulgular, yasal vatandaşlığın kurumsal erişim ve resmî haklar sağlamakla birlikte, duygusal veya sembolik aidiyeti kendiliğinden garanti etmediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Katılımcıların birçoğu, vatandaşlıktan sonra dahi koşullu kabul ve toplumsal dışlanma deneyimlerinin sürdüğünü bildirmiştir. Buna karşılık, çalışmaya katılan Türk vatandaşlarının önemli bir kısmı kültürel erozyon, ulusal birlik ve vatandaşlığa alınan nüfusun meşruiyeti konusunda kaygılarını dile getirmiştir. Kesin sonuçlar sunmaktan ziyade, çalışma gerilim, kısmi tanınma ve duygusal uyumsuzluk alanlarını vurgulamaktadır. Kaygı, anlatı, rutin, mekân ve aidiyet olmak üzere beş tematik boyut etrafında yapılandırılan analiz, vatandaşlığın vatandaşlığa kabul edilenler ve ev sahibi toplum açısından nasıl deneyimlendiğine dair ön bulgular sunmaktadır. Makale, TÜBİTAK (Türkiye Bilimsel ve Teknolojik Araştırma Kurumu) 1001 Bilimsel Araştırma Destek Programı tarafından finanse edilen daha kapsamlı bir araştırma projesinin pilot verilerine dayanmaktadır. Bu veriler ayrıca yazarların danışman-öğrenci ilişkisi içinde yürütmekte oldukları doktora tezine de katkı sağlamaktadır. Pilot bir çalışma olarak, bulgular genellenebilir sonuçlar sunmamakta, ancak vatandaşlığın hukuki, duygusal ve toplumsal boyutları arasındaki etkileşime ilişkin öncül çıkarımlar sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ontolojik güvenlik, Vatandaşlık, Aidiyet, Vatandaşlığa kabul edilen Suriyeli göçmenler, Yerli Türk vatandaşları, Tanınma.*

Introduction

The protracted Syrian civil war has positioned Türkiye as one of the world's leading host countries for asylum seekers. By 2024, more than 239,000 Syrians had obtained Turkish citizenship through an exceptional naturalization process. Although this legal shift from temporary protection to formal citizenship holds the potential to facilitate integration, it has simultaneously produced complex identity dilemmas and heightened social

tensions. Mutual ontological (in) security emerges: naturalized Syrians face social marginalization while segments of the native Turkish population express apprehensions regarding national identity erosion, demographic transformation, and the perceived legitimacy of their inclusion.

These ambivalent experiences underscore the need to move beyond legal definitions of citizenship and toward more nuanced, relational understandings of inclusion. Legal status alone does not ensure emotional security or societal recognition. At the same time, citizenship acquisition by formerly excluded groups may threaten host communities' collective self-understanding, undermining their ontological security. Recent studies emphasize that such identity anxieties are not merely instrumental but are embedded in deeper affective dimensions of ontological (in)security, particularly concerning the coherence and symbolic boundaries of the nation (Skey & Antonsich, 2017; Greve, 2018; Bölükbaşı & Yücel, 2021).

The concept of ontological security offers a useful framework for examining how both naturalized Syrians in Türkiye and native Turkish citizens negotiate issues of national identity, belonging, and mutual recognition. This study employs a relational framework to examine how both parties experience emotional uncertainty in the face of social and political transformation. Rather than conceptualizing ontological (in)security as a unilateral phenomenon experienced solely by migrants, this study adopts a relational approach that considers how both host society and migrants co-construct identity narratives in response to perceived threats. Browning and Joenniemi (2017) argue that ontological security involves processes of self-articulation and identity (de)securitization that unfold within broader political and societal transformations. Furthermore, as evidenced by data from notable field studies in this area, public perceptions of Syrians continue to be marked by suspicion and resistance despite their legal integration into society, indicating that recognition lags behind rights (Erdoğan, 2018, 2020, 2022, 2024). These dynamics are not solely the result of pragmatic concerns or instrumental anxieties; rather, they reflect a deeper existential unease. As Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020) argue, ontological (in)security often emerges when individuals or communities struggle to manage existential anxiety through coherent identity narratives. This highlights that identity tensions in post-naturalization contexts may be rooted in more profound disruptions of symbolic and emotional stability.

To this end, the study investigates two core research questions:

- How do naturalized Syrians in Türkiye experience ontological (in)security and belonging after acquiring Turkish citizenship?
- How do native Turkish citizens perceive the presence and recognition of naturalized Syrians, and how do these perceptions affect their own ontological security?

This study, which addresses these questions using mixed methods, brings together in-depth qualitative interviews with naturalized Syrians and complementary survey data from both groups. The analysis is structured around five interrelated themes: Anxiety, Narrative, Routine, Space, and Belonging. The study is part of a large-scale project supported by TÜBİTAK 1001 (Scientific and Technological Research Projects Support Program) and was conducted as the pilot phase of a doctoral research project using findings of this project.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the concept of ontological security, which originates from R. D. Laing's (1965) psychiatric analyses of the individual's efforts to preserve a coherent sense of self, and was later theorized at the sociological level by Anthony Giddens (1991). Laing argued that individuals require certain psychological defense mechanisms to maintain a sense of continuity and coherence within their internal world. This approach was subsequently expanded by Giddens, who emphasized the need to stabilize identity through social relationships, routines, and narratives. According to Giddens, this framework is rooted in the search for continuity, predictability, and order in one's experience of the world, and this sense of security is essential for managing existential anxieties.

Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020) complement this perspective by moving beyond Giddens's original framing to conceptualize "anxiety" as a foundational element of ontological security. They argue that ontological security is not merely the absence of physical threats but the preservation of self-continuity through recognition and symbolic emplacement.

In this view, individuals can remain ontologically insecure even when material dangers have receded, if they feel misrecognized or symbolically displaced. Krickel-Choi (2022) further deepens this conceptual distinction, underscoring that ontological security depends on coherent narrative frameworks and routinized social practices that anchor the self across time. For displaced populations such as Syrians in Turkey and the local communities encountering them, forced migration disrupts these narrative continuities, producing identity fragmentation and emotional disconnection. In contexts where legal inclusion is not matched by affective integration or public recognition, individuals may experience profound ontological insecurity. Here, recognition is understood in line with the social theory of recognition (Honneth, 1996; Taylor, 1994), emphasizing that misrecognition can undermine self-confidence and social belonging.

To adequately conceptualize the ontological (in)securities emerging between naturalized Syrians and native Turkish citizens, this study draws upon an integrated theoretical approach that weaves together several strands of the existing literature. First, it is grounded in Anthony Giddens' (1991) foundational notion of ontological security, which emphasizes the individual's

need for routine and a coherent self-narrative to manage anxiety in the face of uncertainty. This individual-centered view is extended by scholars such as Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008), who argue that collectives-particularly political communities and states-also seek ontological security by stabilizing their identities through routinized practices, symbolic boundaries, and narrative consistency.

This concept is further enriched by recent scholarship that highlights the affective and relational dimensions of ontological security, particularly in the context of forced migration and naturalization. For instance, Skey and Antonsich (2017) argue that belonging is not only a cognitive or legal condition, but one that is deeply felt and constantly negotiated in daily life. Similarly, Ziss (2024) emphasizes that even after naturalization, Syrians in Türkiye experience ambivalence, as legal status does not fully resolve social exclusion or secure emotional integration. Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020) emphasize that anxiety and fear are central to understanding ontological (in)security in world politics, as both individual and collective identities are threatened by crises (Kinnvall, 2004). They argue that responses to these anxieties shape political behavior and narratives of belonging. Building on this approach, Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020) revisit the existentialist roots of ontological security and distinguish between normal and neurotic anxiety. They contend that the inability to establish narrative coherence in the face of structural or symbolic disruption exacerbates ontological (in)security.

This framework deepens our understanding of how naturalized individuals and host societies may both experience anxiety not merely due to external threats, but due to internal dislocations in their sense of self and moral order. Complementing this view, Kinnvall and Svensson (2022) explore how migration and social care dilemmas contribute to citizens' ontological (in)security, particularly within the European Union context, offering relevant parallels to the Turkish case. Building on this foundation, Kinnvall and Svensson (2022) also explore how populist discourse capitalizes on widespread anxieties and fantasies to construct emotionally charged narratives of belonging and exclusion. Although their analysis focuses on the European context, their findings offer relevant insights into how similar discursive mechanisms in Türkiye shape perceptions of migrants and national identity, reinforcing boundaries and heightening ontological insecurities among both host citizens and newcomers.

In the Turkish context, periods of heightened political debate-particularly during election cycles-can be accompanied by more frequent public discussions on migration, sometimes shaped by media coverage and political narratives with securitizing undertones. According to several interview participants, such periods could make social interaction and coexistence feel more strained, even if these dynamics often subside after the political climate stabilizes.

Furthermore, the spatial dimension of the framework, which is often overlooked, is particularly evident in the case of Turkey. Just as individuals anchor their identities and sense of security to their homes, states also anchor their national identities to limited territories imbued with symbolic meaning through historical narratives, symbols, rituals, and collective memory (Anderson, 1986; Smith, 1999; Tetik, 2018; Güç, 2022). This dynamic underscores how both states and individuals anchor their sense of identity in spatial continuity and symbolic geographies (Tetik, 2018; Güç, 2022). In this sense, migration and citizenship acquisition can reshape the symbolic geography of the nation-state and affect not only official borders but also the perceived "inner" and "outer" spaces where belonging is secured and potential threats are located. At the micro level, neighborhoods, workplaces, and public spaces become critical areas where national belonging is reinforced or questioned, and ontological security is maintained or weakened through daily routines, local interactions, and public visibility. These dynamics are essential for understanding how both Syrian citizens and Turkish citizens experience (in)security not only at the institutional level but also in their daily spatial practices and the socio-symbolic environments in which they live.

Finally, the study incorporates insights from critical citizenship studies, particularly those addressing the emotional, symbolic, and everyday dimensions of citizenship beyond its legalistic framing (e.g., Yuval-Davis, 2011; McNevin, 2011; Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). This multi-theoretical foundation allows for a nuanced understanding of how legal inclusion does not always translate into affective integration, and how both migrants and host society members experience ontological uncertainty in the face of demographic, cultural, and political transformations.

Drawing from these frameworks, this study conceptualizes ontological (in)security as a multidimensional condition experienced by both groups: Syrians navigate the ambiguity of exceptional citizenship and the struggle for legitimacy, while Turkish citizens express anxieties about national identity, cultural preservation, and symbolic boundaries. The framework enables a relational analysis of how mutual misrecognition and asymmetrical expectations shape post-naturalization dynamics in Türkiye.

2. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological framework guiding the study, detailing its mixed-methods design, sampling strategy, data collection instruments, and ethical procedures. The aim is to provide a coherent basis for analyzing ontological (in)security through both quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives in a complementary manner.

2.1. Research Design

This study employs an exploratory and convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to analyze the ontological (in)security experiences of Syrians who have been naturalized as Turkish citizens, along with the public perceptions of native Turkish citizens toward this group. The design enables multilayered analysis by integrating individual narratives with quantifiable public attitudes. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed independently and later interpreted in a complementary manner.

2.2. Sample and Participant Profile

The research is based on three primary datasets:

- Survey 1 (Native Turkish citizens): Conducted online with 223 Turkish citizens across various geographic regions. The sample includes diversity in age, education, and political orientation.
- Survey 2 (Naturalized Syrians): Conducted with 50 naturalized Syrians through face-to-face and online methods. Participants were recruited via social media platforms, community networks, and local contacts. The sample is composed of educated and socially active individuals with relatively high public visibility.
- Qualitative Interviews: In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 naturalized Syrians from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, ethnicity (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish), education level (bachelor's to doctoral), and occupational status (public sector employees, private sector workers, and students). Interviews were held in both face-to-face and online settings.

These non-representative samples were selected based on theoretical saturation, narrative variation, and relational patterning for qualitative insight.

2.3. Survey and Interview Instruments

The first component of the data collection process consists of structured surveys designed to capture the conceptual dimensions of the study in a measurable form. Survey instruments were developed based on five thematic dimensions drawn from the literature on ontological security: anxiety, narrative, routine, space, and belonging. Each theme included between 10-20 items using 5-point Likert-type response scales. Questions targeted various dimensions of perceived security, social integration, future expectations, symbolic recognition, and spatial attachment. Surveys were administered in Turkish for native citizens, and in both Turkish and Arabic for naturalized Syrians.

The second component of the data collection process involves a semi-structured interview protocol that allows participants to articulate their experiences of ontological security and belonging in depth. The semi-structured interview guide was organized around the same five thematic dimensions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to express their narratives in depth and without constraint. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using MAXQDA software.

2.4. Instrument Development and Validation

The survey design was informed by conceptual structuring based on extensive literature review. Instruments were reviewed during the dissertation advisory process and refined through pre-testing to ensure content validity. As this is a pilot study, statistical tests for reliability and construct validity (e.g., Cronbach's alpha) were not extensively conducted. However, the instruments are conceptually robust and offer a solid foundation for future large-scale studies.

2.5. Ethical Procedures

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Yıldız Technical University, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities. All participants provided informed consent. Special care was taken during interviews with naturalized Syrians to respect political sensitivities and privacy concerns. All data were anonymized and used solely for scientific purposes.

This study presents preliminary data from a pilot phase conducted within the scope of a larger TÜBİTAK 1001-funded research project and the doctoral dissertation embedded within it.

2.6. Limitations

This study constitutes a pilot phase of a broader TÜBİTAK 1001 research project, as well as the doctoral dissertation embedded within it. Therefore, it carries several methodological limitations.

First, the study uses a non-representative sample. Both the naturalized Syrians and the native Turkish participants are predominantly urban, educated, and digitally connected individuals. In particular, the Syrian participants were accessed through digital and interpersonal networks, and therefore may exclude the perspectives of socially marginalized or economically vulnerable groups.

Second, the sample sizes-especially for the Syrian surveys and interviews—are not sufficient for statistical generalization. While the number of interviews approaches theoretical saturation for qualitative analysis, its limitations in diversity should be acknowledged.

Third, although the survey items were conceptually developed and pre-tested, comprehensive statistical reliability testing (e.g., factor analysis, Cronbach's alpha) could not be applied due to the pilot nature of the study. The instruments serve as a preliminary model for future research.

Lastly, language barriers and trust-building dynamics occasionally posed challenges during data collection. Some interviews were conducted with translation support, and some participants showed reluctance in expressing sensitive experiences.

In light of these limitations, the study's findings should be interpreted as exploratory insights into emerging patterns and should not be generalized to the entire populations of naturalized Syrians or native Turkish citizens.

3. FINDINGS

This section presents an integrated analysis of qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews with naturalized Syrians and two quantitative surveys: one with naturalized Syrians and another with native Turkish citizens. Thematic analysis based on ontological security theory identified five core themes: Anxiety, Narrative, Routine, Space, and Belonging. These themes illuminate the ways in which identity is reconstituted through the interplay of past experiences and new citizenship status.

A total of 340 codes were generated: 244 were associated with New Identity/Turkishness and 96 with Former Identity/Syrianness. Across all codes, routines emerged as a critical foundation for ontological security. The findings reveal that despite legal naturalization, ontological security remains fragile—particularly in domains of public recognition, social acceptance, and spatial inclusion.

3.1. Anxiety

This theme captures the ontological (in)securities stemming from fragmented identity formation in Syria and uncertainties surrounding exceptional citizenship status in Türkiye for naturalized Syrians, as well as the anxieties of native Turkish citizens regarding identity, cultural cohesion, and the perceived legitimacy of this group's inclusion.

- Lack of Recognition and Identity Fragmentation

G1: "My mother told us not to say we were Kurdish or Turkmen—just say Arab. But I used to say at school: I'm Kurdish. I feel the same in Türkiye now."

G9: "I'm a citizen, but there's always this fear of being sent back."

G4: "I constantly think about my exceptional citizenship. During elections, it becomes a topic. What if they revoke it?"

- Social Exclusion

G4: "Even though I'm officially Turkish, people around me don't accept me. I still feel like a foreigner."

- Safety and Legal Protection

G7: "Freedom! No more travel permits. I can live anywhere. I'm not afraid anymore."

- Perceptions of the Turkish Public

The survey of native Turkish citizens (host society) reveals significant anxieties about identity and social cohesion.

- 61% believe granting citizenship to Syrians threatens Turkish national identity.
- 57% oppose granting citizenship to Syrians.
- 62% believe Syrians disrupt Turkish culture.
- 68% state that Syrian values are incompatible with Turkish values.
- 64% would not accept close social or family ties with Syrians.

These findings indicate that legal citizenship alone does not dispel public perceptions of Syrians as outsiders, and ontological (in)security persists in the absence of collective recognition. These persistent feelings of uncertainty not only affect daily routines but also influence the personal and collective stories individuals construct about themselves and their place in society.

Collectively, these experiences of anxiety and uncertainty shape the personal and collective stories through which both naturalized Syrians and native Turkish citizens interpret their place in society. The following section examines how these narratives of self and belonging evolve after naturalization.

3.2. Narrative

Biographical narratives reveal how individuals reinterpret their identity through both past experiences and post-naturalization processes.

- Authoritarian Regimes and National Myths

G9: "Our historians always spoke against the Ottomans. Everything was a lie."

- Narratives of Legitimacy through Turkishness

Illustrating an attempt to claim recognition via cultural affinity:

G5: "My roots are Turkish. That's why we came. My grandmother spoke Turkish."

G3: "My grandmother came from Istanbul. I grew up listening to Turkish music—I always felt close to this culture."

- Devaluation of Syrian Identity

G7: "Being Syrian felt shameful after coming to Türkiye. I never felt that way in Syria."

- Citizenship as a Narrative Breakthrough

G8: "Voting made me feel valuable—but also nervous. Responsibility!"

G1: "After I became a citizen, I bought a flag, hung it on the balcony, and walked around with it."

- Hybrid Identity and Dual Belonging

G7: "In Türkiye, I'm empowered by my Turkish identity. But if the war ends, I'll return to Syria."

G1: "Right now, I say I'm both Syrian and Turkish."

- Resistance in Host Society Narratives

Collectively, these results show that attempts by naturalized Syrians to construct legitimate narratives are often dismissed or resisted in public discourse, limiting their ability to establish social identity continuity.

Building upon these evolving narratives of belonging and legitimacy, the next section explores how such identity negotiations manifest in everyday routines and social practices that provide a sense of continuity and stability.

3.3. Routine

Daily practices are a central pillar of ontological security (Giddens, 1991; Mitzen, 2006), offering stability, predictability, and emotional safety.

- Language Use and Intergenerational Practices

G5: "I teach my kids Turkish. This is our home now."

G9: "I love Turkish… I watch TV in Arabic to avoid forgetting it."

- Social Relationships and Mutual Respect

G7: "After becoming a citizen, people said: 'You're one of us now.' It was like a wall had come down."

- Cultural and Religious Rituals

G5: "Republic Day—it really makes me feel like this is my homeland."

G7: "Our holidays were more festive back home. I don't feel the spirit here."

- Family Dynamics and Educational Aspirations

G7: "I don't want my kids to grow up afraid like me."

G5: "Language is everything. My children are now Turkish."

- Barriers Despite Citizenship

G4: "Even with citizenship, I still feel like an outsider."

G9: "They ask: Are you Syrian? That hurts."

- Host Society's Rejection of Shared Routines
  - 64% of native Turkish citizens do not want Syrians living in their neighborhoods.
  - 61% oppose having Syrian children in the same schools.
  - 57% are uncomfortable with Syrians being visible in public spaces.

These indicators reflect that while the majority of naturalized Syrians are adapting their daily lives for integration, the native Turkish population is resisting mutual integration, thereby weakening the routines that are necessary for ontological security. These daily patterns unfold within specific physical and social spaces, which themselves become central to how security and belonging are experienced.

As these daily routines unfold within specific physical and social settings, the following section examines how space itself becomes a site where ontological security is negotiated, challenged, and redefined.

3.4. Space

Space is both a material and symbolic domain where identity and ontological security are negotiated (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020).

- Spatial Stigma and Exclusion

G7: "After coming to Türkiye, being Syrian started to feel shameful. That never happened in Syria."

- Citizenship and Spatial Empowerment

G4: "After becoming a citizen, I felt I wouldn't be treated unfairly anymore."

G8: "Without citizenship, I couldn't have used my skills fully."

- Spatial Disillusionment

G1: "Even as a citizen, they don't see me that way."

- Dual Spatial Belonging

G3: "Now I have a second homeland."

G1: "I say I'm both Syrian and Turkish."

- Spatial Boundaries in Turkish Society
  - 64% reject living in the same neighborhood as Syrians.
  - 57% are disturbed by Syrians' presence in public spaces.

These findings show that legal citizenship does not necessarily translate into spatial belonging. At the micro level, neighborhoods and public spaces remain sites of exclusion, while at the macro level, as Browning and Joenniemi (2017) note, the symbolic geography of the nation-state can be perceived as under transformation, fueling ontological (in)security. The

symbolic and material qualities of these spaces directly feed into broader feelings of belonging—or, in some cases, alienation.

Taken together, the preceding themes of anxiety, narrative, routine, and space collectively shape how individuals understand and negotiate belonging. Building on these interrelated dynamics, the following section examines how legal status, social recognition, and everyday experiences converge to form broader feelings of inclusion and ontological security.

3.5. Belonging

Belonging emerges at the intersection of the previous four themes, encompassing legal, emotional, social, and symbolic dimensions of identity reconstruction.

G1: "I bought a flag, draped it over my shoulders, and walked outside."

G9: "Even though it says 'Turkish' on my ID, people still ask: Are you Syrian? But my kids are Turkish—they'll be different."

- Fragile Belonging and Lack of Recognition
  - 57% oppose Syrian naturalization.
  - 61% say it threatens Turkish national identity.
  - 62% believe Syrians are disrupting Turkish culture.

These statistics underscore the fragility of belonging when legal recognition is not matched by public acceptance.

- Dimensions of Belonging Among Syrians
  - Hybrid Identity
  - Second Homeland
  - Distinction from Temporary Protection Status
  - Acceptance or Rejection by Turkish Society
  - Nation-Building through Cultural Symbols
  - Belonging via Children
  - Legal and Emotional Security
  - Territorial Attachment

The data suggest that belonging is not solely a function of legal inclusion but a negotiated, ongoing process of recognition, legitimacy, and emotional investment. It is not only about acquiring citizenship but also about being seen, accepted, and allowed to participate in the collective imagination of the nation.

This integrated finding section demonstrates how ontological (in)security is experienced through intersecting axes of legal status, social perception, spatial integration, and narrative continuity. Despite naturalization, full belonging remains elusive without societal recognition. Taken together, these themes illustrate how emotional states, social narratives,

daily practices, and spatial attachments intertwine to produce and reinforce ontological insecurity.

4. DISCUSSION

This study provides a multilayered analysis of how naturalized Syrians experience identity reconstruction and ontological (in)security. Based on a combination of qualitative interviews and survey data, the findings demonstrate that while legal citizenship facilitates individual empowerment and basic legal rights, it does not guarantee full societal acceptance or emotional stability. Citizenship, in this context, emerges not as a definitive solution but as the beginning of a more complex process of belonging and identity negotiation.

4.1. Ontological Security and the Undefined Citizen

The concept of ontological security suggests that individuals seek stability through recognized identities, coherent self-narratives, and predictable social environments.

In this study, Syrians who have been granted citizenship are generally placed in an uncertain status: they are legally included but not socially recognized. On the other hand, some segments of the host community are experiencing their own uncertainties regarding national identity and cultural integration in the context of demographic change due to the acquisition of citizenship by Syrians. The exceptional nature of their citizenship status generates uncertainty about the permanence and legitimacy of their belonging, which in turn sustains a persistent sense of insecurity. As emphasized by Greve (2018), such conditions reflect not merely administrative or legal ambiguities but deeper struggles for recognition—fundamental to maintaining ontological security within communities. Where recognition is absent, formal inclusion may still coexist with symbolic and emotional exclusion.

4.2. Anxiety: Between Protection and Exclusion

Although citizenship grants legal protection and mobility, widespread societal skepticism toward Syrians undermines the security such rights are expected to provide. Survey data reveal high levels of discomfort with Syrians' presence in shared spaces (Erdoğan, 2018, 2020, 2022, 2024). Our pilot findings, consistent with these broader surveys, also indicate that such discomfort is reinforced during periods of heightened political debate, media attention, or electoral campaigns. These patterns suggest that legal status does not automatically produce ontological reassurance for either group; in some cases, it may even heighten mutual insecurity and reinforce dynamics of misrecognition.

4.3. Narrative: Rewriting Identity and Seeking Legitimacy

Narratives are central to how individuals make sense of who they are and where they belong. Among naturalized Syrians, these narratives often emphasize cultural affinity with Türkiye, historical family ties, or personal expressions of loyalty. However, the broader public's reluctance to accept these new identities limits the social power of such narratives, leaving a persistent gap between self-recognition and societal validation. As Ziss (2024) observes, naturalization may grant formal rights yet fail to provide full emotional security when public discourse continues to mark Syrians as outsiders.

4.4. Routine: Everyday Practices of Integration

Routines and everyday practices constitute key arenas where integration is either facilitated or remains partial. Many Syrians actively adopt linguistic, cultural, and social habits aligned with their new environment—particularly through their children's schooling and participation in public and national celebrations. However, such adaptation does not always lead to full reciprocity or social recognition. Survey findings and pilot interviews indicate that some members of the host society continue to approach these new forms of participation with hesitation or social distance (Erdoğan, 2024). These observations suggest that daily routines serve both as instruments of adaptation and as indicators of ongoing social negotiation. Through language learning, shared rituals, and community engagement, naturalized Syrians seek normalization and stability, yet the extent of their acceptance remains uneven and context-dependent.

4.5. Space: Symbolic and Social Boundaries of Belonging

The spatial dimension of ontological (in)security extends the dynamics observed in everyday routines, revealing how belonging is also negotiated through physical environments and symbolic spaces. This reflects the argument developed by Browning and Joenniemi (2017), who highlight the spatial foundations of ontological (in)security and the ways in which national identity is symbolically affected by the public visibility of migrants. Consequently, while Syrians seek stability through spatial engagement and participation in daily routines, they continue to encounter certain structural forms of spatial distance and limited inclusion.

Furthermore, both pilot field data and broader empirical observations indicate that, alongside positive integration trajectories, there are also instances where integration remains limited and spatial tensions persist. These less compatible cases illustrate how structural, spatial, and perceptual boundaries continue to constrain social cohesion and everyday coexistence.

4.6. Belonging: A Conditional and Fragile Outcome

Belonging in this context emerges as a multidimensional and evolving process shaped by legal recognition, cultural practice, emotional attachment, and social acceptance. The experiences of naturalized Syrians reveal a complex combination of attachment to both Türkiye and Syria. While many describe Türkiye as a second homeland, their full incorporation into the national imagination remains partial. As Skey and Antonsich (2017) emphasize, belonging is not a fixed end-state but a dynamic process shaped by time, memory, and mutual recognition. Ziss (2024) conceptualizes this as the ambivalent value of citizenship, where formal inclusion and legal status do not necessarily secure emotional belonging or full symbolic recognition.

The most hopeful expressions of belonging among naturalized Syrians often center on their children, who are perceived as bridges toward future integration and acceptance. However, both our pilot findings and wider empirical evidence indicate that belonging continues to depend on broader patterns of social acknowledgment and public discourse. Thus, belonging remains a conditional and fragile process—negotiated daily within the emotional, cultural, and social boundaries that shape collective life in Türkiye.

Conclusion

This study integrates qualitative and quantitative data to examine the ontological (in)security experiences of both naturalized Syrians and members of the native Turkish population. The findings indicate that ontological (in)security is not confined to a single group but emerges in distinct forms across both populations. For naturalized Syrians, it is associated with fragile legal perceptions, experiences of social exclusion, and limited societal recognition. For the Turkish public, ontological (in)security originates from perceptions of identity threat, cultural dilution, and concerns over societal change. Some naturalized Syrians also struggle to fully relinquish aspects of their former identity or feel distant from certain elements of Turkish national identity. Together, these dynamics illustrate a mutually reinforcing cycle of ontological (in)security sustained by limited recognition and persistent symbolic boundaries.

Among naturalized Syrians, the persistence of ontological (in)security despite the acquisition of formal citizenship is particularly notable. While many individuals actively seek to adopt elements of Turkish national identity—through language acquisition, symbolic participation, and the construction of shared narratives—these efforts often encounter varying degrees of societal resistance. Such resistance can hinder the development of emotional stability and a sustained sense of belonging. Simultaneously, segments of the Turkish population express discomfort with what they perceive as a permanent demographic shift, framing it as a challenge to national identity and social cohesion.

One of the most significant findings is the presence of a dual process of "othering" in both groups. While for many naturalized Syrians these manifests primarily through experiences of non-acceptance, in some cases it also involves framing segments of the Turkish population as socially distant or culturally incompatible, often articulated through narratives that emphasize perceived discrimination, differences in social norms, or a lack of reciprocity in intercultural engagement. Conversely, parts of the host society regard the cultural and identity claims of naturalized Syrians as insufficient or lacking authenticity. This mutual non-recognition sustains symbolic boundaries that perpetuate insecurity for both groups and limits the potential for deeper social integration.

It is essential to underscore that the present findings are not intended to be generalized, given the pilot nature of the study; however, they offer important theoretical insights into the mechanisms of mutual ontological (in)security that can guide future large-scale research. The study draws on pilot field data collected as part of a larger TÜBİTAK 1001-funded project and an associated doctoral dissertation. Accordingly, both the survey instruments and in-depth interview protocols should be viewed as preliminary tools for a subsequent, more representative study. These results serve to refine research questions, validate measurement instruments, and strengthen the analytical framework for future stages of the project.

In sum, the study demonstrates that post-naturalization integration is not solely a legal process, but a multifaceted transformation encompassing social, spatial, and symbolic dimensions. Achieving ontological security requires more than individual adaptation; it also depends on fostering mutual recognition and cultivating inclusive public narratives. Future large-scale and methodologically robust research will be vital to further unpack these dynamics and provide insights with broader scholarly and societal relevance.

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