The Representation of Syrian Asylum Seekers in Turkish and Global English Media: A Van Dijkian Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstrak - Studi ini meneliti bagaimana pencari suaka Suriah direpresentasikan dalam media Turki dan media berbahasa Inggris global, dengan perhatian khusus pada pilihan wacana yang digunakan untuk membangun makna dan ideologi. Dengan mengacu pada model sosio-kognitif Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) Van Dijk, penelitian ini berfokus pada pola leksikal, strategi pembingkaian, dan fitur struktural yang membentuk narasi media tentang pencari suaka. Dataset mencakup konten media dari outlet Turki seperti Hürriyet, Daily Sabah, Cumhuriyet, BirGün, dan GZT, bersama dengan sumber media global termasuk BBC, The Guardian, The New York Times, dan Al Jazeera English. Mencakup periode antara tahun 2019 dan 2025, analisis mengidentifikasi dua kerangka dominan dan berulang: pembingkaian kemanusiaan dan pembingkaian sekuritisasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa media Turki cenderung berpindah-pindah antara narasi belas kasihan dan keprihatinan atas tekanan ekonomi atau sosial, sementara media global lebih sering menempatkan Turki dalam wacana geopolitik dan keamanan yang lebih luas. Di kedua konteks tersebut, pencari suaka sebagian besar diposisikan sebagai objek kebijakan daripada subjek pengalaman aktif. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa representasi ini tidak netral tetapi mencerminkan perjuangan ideologis yang lebih luas di mana bahasa memainkan peran sentral dalam membentuk persepsi publik dan kognisi sosial.

Kata Kunci: Pencari suaka Suriah; analisis wacana kritis; representasi media; pembingkaian kemanusiaan; sekuritisasi; Van Dijk

Abstract - This study examines how Syrian asylum seekers are represented in Turkish and global English-language media, with particular attention to the discursive choices through which meaning and ideology are constructed. Drawing on Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research focuses on lexical patterns, framing strategies, and structural features that shape media narratives about asylum seekers. The data set includes media content from Turkish outlets such as Hürriyet, Daily Sabah, Cumhuriyet, BirGün, and GZT, alongside global media sources including BBC, The Guardian, The New York Times, and Al Jazeera English. Covering the period between 2019 and 2025, the analysis identifies two dominant and recurring frames: humanitarian framing and securitization framing. The findings suggest that Turkish media tends to move between narratives of compassion and concerns over economic or social strain, while global media more frequently situates Türkiye within broader geopolitical and security-oriented discourses. Across both contexts, asylum seekers are largely positioned as objects of policy rather than active subjects of experience. The study argues that these representations are not neutral but reflect wider ideological struggles in which language plays a central role in shaping public perception and social cognition.

Key words: Syrian asylum seekers; critical discourse analysis; media representation; humanitarian framing; securitization; Van Dijk.

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict has produced one of the most extensive displacement crises of the twenty-first century. Türkiye, hosting approximately 3.5 million Syrian asylum seekers, occupies a central position in regional and global debates on migration. Public understandings of this situation are shaped not only by political decisions but also, and perhaps more persistently, by media discourse. News coverage plays a key role in framing asylum seekers as vulnerable individuals, social contributors, economic burdens, or security concerns, often within the same national context.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a useful framework for examining how such representations are produced and circulated. Rather than treating media language as neutral or merely descriptive, CDA draws attention to the ideological assumptions embedded in discourse and to the power relations they sustain. This study

aims to compare how Syrian asylum seekers are represented in Turkish and global English-language media, focusing on the ways in which humanitarian and securitization frames are constructed and normalized.

Previous research on media representations of refugees and asylum seekers has consistently shown that such coverage is shaped by broader political and ideological contexts. Studies focusing on European media, including Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017), demonstrate that humanitarian narratives often combine empathy with control, presenting refugees as deserving of compassion while simultaneously limiting their agency. KhosraviNik (2010) similarly identifies the frequent use of metaphors such as "waves" or "floods," which portray refugees as anonymous masses and contribute to processes of dehumanization.

Fekete (2009) situates these discursive patterns within wider structures of racism and Islamophobia, arguing that migration discourse often legitimizes exclusionary practices under the guise of security or cultural protection. Together, these studies underline how media language can normalize inequality and reinforce boundaries between "us" and "them." In the Turkish context, research by Doğanay (2020) shows that representations of Syrian refugees vary significantly across the national press. Pro-government outlets tend to reproduce official narratives emphasizing humanitarian responsibility, while oppositional media more often foreground economic pressures and social tensions. Paksoy's (2022) discourse-historical analysis further traces a shift from early narratives of hospitality toward more anxiety-driven representations as the Syrian presence in Türkiye became prolonged.

Theoretically, this study draws on Fairclough's (1995) understanding of discourse as a form of social practice and Van Dijk's (1998, 2008) socio-cognitive approach, which links discourse to mental models and shared social knowledge. These perspectives provide a foundation for examining how media representations of Syrian asylum seekers are shaped by, and in turn shape, ideological frameworks. Using Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, the study explores how discourse operates at the intersection of language, ideology, and shared social knowledge. By bringing Turkish and global media into the same analytical frame, the research seeks to highlight how local political narratives and global power structures interact in shaping public perceptions of asylum seekers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Limitations

While this study offers critical insights into the discursive construction of Syrian asylum seekers, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the corpus consists of 24 media items selected from a six-year period (2019–2025). Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as a qualitative exploration of dominant framing mechanisms rather than a quantitative measure of their frequency across the entire media landscape. This relatively small sample size was necessitated by the labor-intensive nature of the multi-level analysis employed—specifically the granular examination of lexical choice, syntactic structures, and news schemata required by Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model. Therefore, this research prioritizes analytical depth over statistical breadth, aiming to reveal *how* ideologies are encoded in specific paradigmatic texts rather than *how often* they appear in the aggregate. Future studies could complement this approach with corpus linguistics tools to validate these discursive patterns across larger datasets.

3.2. The Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis. CDA was employed to examine discursive strategies, ideological positioning, and lexical patterns across selected media texts. The corpus consists of 24 media items—12 from Turkish outlets and 12 from global outlets—including news articles, opinion pieces, and multimedia reports published between 2019 and 2025.

The data were collected from official online archives using keywords such as "Syrian refugees," "asylum seekers," and "Türkiye." Analysis was conducted at three interconnected levels. At the macrostructural level, dominant themes such as humanitarianism, economic burden, and security were identified. The microstructural analysis focused on lexical choices, metaphors, and syntactic patterns, while the superstructural level examined the organization of news narratives, headline construction, and source prominence. This multi-level approach allows for a closer examination of how ideology is encoded and reproduced through media discourse. To enhance methodological transparency, a coding scheme informed by Van Dijk's ideological square and framing strategies was developed and systematically applied across the corpus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals two dominant discursive frames across Turkish and global English-language media: humanitarian framing and securitization framing. While these frames are often presented as oppositional, the findings suggest that they frequently operate together, shaping how asylum seekers are understood and discussed.

4.1. Humanitarian Framing

Humanitarian framing is particularly visible in Turkish mainstream media outlets such as Hürriyet and Daily Sabah, where Türkiye is commonly portrayed as a compassionate and responsible host country. Coverage frequently emphasizes themes of generosity and protection through lexical choices such as "support," "hosting," and "humanitarian duty." Reports highlighting institutional assistance, such as "Turkish Red Crescent supports Syrian families with winter supplies" (Daily Sabah, 2023), reinforce narratives of national benevolence. In Van Dijk's terms, this reflects positive self-presentation achieved through selective emphasis.

Similar patterns appear in reports that focus on everyday life and belonging. For instance, "Syrian refugees make Turkey their second home" (Anadolu Ajansı, 2020) frames displacement in terms of adaptation and rebuilding, foregrounding stability while limiting political agency. Humanitarian narratives are also evident in Turkish digital media such as GZT, where emotionally charged storytelling frames displacement as necessity rather than choice, as seen in "Türkiye'ye sığınmaları tercih değil, zorunluluk" (2021).

Global media outlets such as BBC and TRT World similarly foreground individual suffering and resilience. Reports like "Syrian refugees in Turkey struggle to rebuild their lives" (BBC News, 2020) and "Syrian family finds peace in Turkey" (TRT World, 2021) humanize displacement through personal narratives. While these representations evoke empathy, they often depoliticize the structural conditions that shape forced migration.

A closer microstructural analysis further reveals how lexical choices contribute to humanitarian framing. For instance, the recurrent use of expressions such as "support," "hosting," and "protection" in several Turkish news reports constructs Türkiye as a benevolent actor while positioning asylum seekers primarily as passive recipients of aid. From a Van Dijkian perspective, this pattern illustrates positive self-presentation of the in-group and the strategic foregrounding of humanitarian responsibility.

4.2. Securitization Framing

Alongside humanitarian discourse, securitization emerges as a persistent frame, particularly in oppositional Turkish media such as Cumhuriyet and BirGün. In Cumhuriyet, the presence of Syrian asylum seekers is frequently linked to economic strain and social pressure through lexical items such as "burden," "rising rents," and "pressure." These choices frame migration as a risk to social stability, exemplifying negative other-presentation within Van Dijk's ideological square. BirGün adopts a more critical stance that highlights policy failures and labor exploitation, yet still situates migration within narratives of crisis. Although sympathetic toward refugees, the paper reproduces problem-oriented representations that contribute to securitization.

In global English-language media, securitization framing often intersects with geopolitical concerns. Coverage in BBC News, such as "Syria conflict: Why a ceasefire is proving so elusive" (2019), emphasizes ongoing instability, while Al Jazeera English situates displacement within post-conflict uncertainty in "Post-Assad, Syria's security challenges persist despite political change" (2025). In these narratives, asylum seekers are frequently reduced to figures within broader security and policy debates, with limited attention to lived experience.

At the microstructural level, lexical items such as "burden," "pressure," and "crisis" function as discursive signals that associate asylum seekers with risk and instability. Such lexicalization contributes to the reproduction of negative other-presentation, a central component of Van Dijk's ideological square. These linguistic patterns not only frame migration as a social problem but also reinforce boundaries between the national in-group and the refugee out-group.

4.3. Ideological Implications

Across both Turkish and global media, Van Dijk's ideological square is consistently reproduced through positive self-presentation of the in-group and the problem-oriented representation of the out-group. Humanitarian discourse highlights moral responsibility, while securitization discourse legitimizes control and

management. Rather than functioning as opposing narratives, these frames appear to complement one another, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations and limiting refugee agency. Notably, direct refugee voices remain scarce across both contexts. Asylum seekers are more often spoken about than spoken with, a pattern that contributes to their discursive marginalization. This absence underscores the socio-cognitive dimension of ideology, through which shared beliefs about refugees are maintained and normalized. The relative absence of direct refugee voices further strengthens this ideological structure, as agency is transferred from refugees to institutions, governments, and journalists.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that representations of Syrian asylum seekers in Turkish and global English-language media are shaped by recurring humanitarian and securitization frames. While Turkish media tends to oscillate between compassion and concern over social or economic impact, global media more frequently situates Türkiye within broader geopolitical narratives. In both contexts, asylum seekers are largely positioned as discursive objects of policy rather than subjects of lived experience. By applying Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, the study highlights how language, framing, and discourse organization contribute to the reproduction of ideology. These findings point to the need for more inclusive media practices that foreground refugee voices and challenge reductive representations. Future research may extend this analysis to digital and social media platforms to explore how alternative discursive spaces reshape understandings of displacement, humanitarianism, and belonging.

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