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Navigating Vulnerability in the Context of Resettlement: Syrian Youth in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT
This article explores vulnerability in the resettlement experiences and imaginaries of Syrian refugee youth (aged 18–35) in Türkiye, a group often excluded from conventional vulnerability frameworks. Based on in-depth interviews, it conceptualizes vulnerability as multi-faceted, spanning innate, structural, and situational dimensions. Findings show how shifting migration policies, politicization, and institutional barriers compound insecurities, shaping how youth imagine and pursue resettlement in a protracted refugee context. The study contributes to debates on vulnerability, youth migration, and the evolving possibilities of resettlement, and underlines the need for international policies and agreements that adopt context-sensitive approaches addressing structural and situational factors.

KEYWORDS
resettlement; vulnerability; youth; Syrian refugees; Türkiye

RÉSUMÉ
Cet article explore la vulnérabilité dans le cadre des expériences et des imaginaires de la réinstallation des jeunes réfugié.e.s syrien.ne.s (âgés de 18 à 35 ans) en Turquie, un groupe souvent exclu des cadres conventionnels de vulnérabilité. Sur la base d'entretiens approfondis, il conceptualise la vulnérabilité comme étant multiforme, avec des dimensions innées, structurelles et situationnelles. Les résultats illustrent la manière dont l'évolution des politiques migratoires, la politisation et les obstacles institutionnels aggravent l'insécurité, façonnant la manière dont les jeunes envisagent et poursuivent leur réinstallation dans des situations de réfugiés prolongées. L'étude contribue aux débats concernant la vulnérabilité, la migration des jeunes ainsi que les possibilités de réinstalations en évolitution et souligne le besoin de politiques et d'accords internationales qui adoptent une approche contextuelle qui tient compte des facteurs structurels et situationnels.

This article focuses on how vulnerability shapes the resettlement experiences and imaginaries of Syrian refugee youth in Türkiye. Its approach to the concepts of vulnerability, resettlement, and youth is multidimensional. First, the analysis defines **vulnerability** as a multi-faceted concept that goes beyond innate characteristics and includes an inseparable mix of situational and structural dimensions. Second, it treats **resettlement** in multiple forms, not only within institutional schemes but also through alternative pathways, such as pursuing education or employment, when such schemes are unavailable. Third, it uses an expanded definition of **youth** that includes both those commonly viewed as vulnerable (e.g., due to gender, health issues, or family circumstances such as single parenthood or having children) and those less often considered

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vulnerable, such as the relatively educated or socio-economically better off. In a similar vein, **imaginaries** in this article encompass not only hopes and desires but also fears and uncertainties. This conceptual preference is especially suited to the empirical analysis, as the participants under study have not yet resettled but are either on a resettlement program awaiting travel or pursuing alternative pathways, such as seeking education and employment in a third country. Within this emphasis and acknowledgement of conceptual multiplicity, the goal is not to make overarching claims or generalizations but to explore the experiences of young refugees from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and resettlement pathways.

Literature typically categorizes vulnerability into three types: **innate** (based on inherent characteristics like age, gender, and disability), **situational** (derived from specific circumstances or experiences), and **structural** (rooted in broader systemic factors) (Gilodi et al., 2024; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Mendola & Pera, 2022). Institutional criteria for identifying those in need of special protection often focus on innate vulnerability, including factors such as age, gender, and disability, alongside health status and exposure to violence or exploitation (Flegar, 2018; Mendola & Pera, 2022). For instance, UNHCR (2011) operationalizes vulnerability through seven categories, including legal and physical protection needs, survivors of violence or torture, medical needs, women and children at risk, family reunification, and the absence of alternative durable solutions. These criteria significantly shape asylum and migration policies, determining who is included or excluded from access to rights and services within protection schemes (Hruschka & Leboeuf, 2019). When protection needs cannot be met in the host country, resettlement to a third country becomes a necessary strategy (UNHCR, n.d.; van Selm, 2004). Nevertheless, since resettlement is an application-based process rather than a recognized right under the international refugee protection regime, only a limited number of refugees benefit from resettlement programs. Authorities commonly prioritize vulnerable cases, prompting many refugees to seek alternative ways to reach a third country on their own. This pursuit of alternative pathways often exposes them to various risks, placing them in vulnerable situations. Furthermore, refugees' migration experiences vary by life stage, with young refugees being especially vulnerable to disrupted education, loss of family support, and psychological trauma (Bradby et al., 2017; Bryant et al., 2024; Gilodi et al., 2023; Heidbrink, 2021; Ní Raghallaigh & Thornton, 2017). For instance, recent research reveals how refugee youth in Türkiye experience "ontological insecurity" in the "limbo" of protracted and uncertain processes for formal and permanent status (Bryant et al., 2024; İçduygu, 2024).

The case of Türkiye remains a significant context for analyzing the conditions and perceptions of vulnerability in the resettlement experiences and imaginaries of Syrian refugee youth. The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has led to significant population displacement in the region. By April 2024, there were 6.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria and about 5.2 million refugees and asylum seekers in neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2024a), with Türkiye hosting the largest Syrian community of 2,491,283 under the temporary protection scheme as of September 4, 2025 (Presidency of Migration Management [PMM], n.d.b). Despite it being over a decade since their arrival, Syrians in Türkiye still hold temporary legal status in 2025, leading to a protracted refugee situation in a state of "permanent

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temporariness" and even "vulnerable permanency" (İçduygu & Aksel, 2022, p. 135). The three durable solutions to refugee protection (local integration, third-country resettlement, and [voluntary] repatriation) offer limited prospects for Syrian refugees, as integration in Türkiye is hindered by restricted access to education and employment, return to Syria is complicated by ongoing conflict, and resettlement in third countries is highly competitive (İçduygu, 2024). Nevertheless, we should also highlight that the international environment surrounding the situation in Syria is still rapidly changing and the domestic political context remains in flux. The Assad regime in Syria collapsed on December 8, 2024, creating a significant shift in the political landscape. Therefore, our findings should be read with the awareness of the temporal context in which they were produced.

Previous research showed that most Syrians wanted to stay in Türkiye due to cultural and religious ties and community networks, with fewer considering resettlement in a third country and even fewer contemplating a return to Syria (Düvell et al., 2021; Kaya, 2017; Kaya & Kıraç, 2016; Rottmann & Kaya, 2021). More recent research, however, shows a shift in their preferences. From 2017 to 2021, the percentage of Syrians wishing to resettle elsewhere increased from 23% to 55%, while those wishing to remain in Türkiye decreased from 65.8% to 22.8% (M. Erdoğan, 2022, p. 24). Additionally, while the majority were not considering returning to Syria (60.8% in 2021), the percentage of those wishing to return increased from 18.3% in 2020 to 34.8% in 2021 (M. Erdoğan, 2022, p. 24). As Düvell et al. (2021, p. 12) have underlined, desiring to migrate does not guarantee it will happen, as doing so depends on multiple means and resources.

Exploring conditions and perceptions of vulnerability in youth resettlement experiences and imaginaries, this article draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees aged 18 to 35. Our interviewees included both refugees registered in institutional resettlement schemes and those outside of them seeking alternative pathways to resettlement through education and employment. Based on this research, we aim to make three main contributions.

First, the analysis goes beyond refugee categories typically considered vulnerable in institutional schemes. Unlike much research that links vulnerability to specific groups, this study additionally includes young educated refugees, challenging essentialist views of vulnerability. Additionally, rather than focusing on inherent vulnerability as many assessment tools do, it emphasizes evolving circumstances and dynamics that contribute to situational and structural vulnerability. We address multiple factors, including the socio-political environment in Türkiye, institutional uncertainties about refugees' futures, bureaucratic challenges in resettlement, and risks during and after resettlement. Against this backdrop, the study explores how young refugees make sense of their own vulnerability, whether entitled to resettlement programs or pursuing alternative pathways, and whether recognized as vulnerable by mainstream criteria or not.

Second, the study investigates how the vulnerabilities of refugees who spent their formative years in a migration context shape their imaginaries of resettlement for the future, even before resettlement or while still striving to create opportunities for it. This exploration is significant for understanding how present vulnerabilities may extend into the post-resettlement period, which is not yet experienced, thereby generating simul-

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taneous hopes and fears and resulting in a temporally fluid and open-ended state of vulnerability.

Third, the study examines a relatively underexplored context concerning the resettlement experiences and imaginaries of refugee youth. It focuses on a Global South setting, Türkiye, which hosts one of the world's largest refugee populations, a significant proportion of whom are young, with growing numbers continuing to be born in the country. Throughout the analysis, the article underscores the importance of lived experiences, arguing that neither vulnerability nor youth should be understood as singular, fixed categories; rather, they extend beyond institutional classifications and are shaped by intersecting social, economic, and political inequalities.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows: First, it reviews and discusses the literature on refugee vulnerability and resettlement. Second, it examines the migration context of Syrian refugees in Türkiye to situate the experiences of youth under study. Third, drawing on fieldwork findings, it analyzes the multiple vulnerabilities shaping Syrian refugee youth's experiences and their imaginaries of resettlement.

THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: RESETTLEMENT AND VULNERABILITY

In response to the precarity of forced displacement and refugeehood, literature and policy (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2024; UNHCR, 2003) promote three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and third-country resettlement. While voluntary repatriation is often considered the ideal long-term solution, it depends on the ability to return safely and with dignity (Harrell-Bond, 1989; UNHCR, 1996). Local integration, meanwhile, requires legal, economic, social, and cultural policies to ensure permanent stay and acceptance by both host and refugee communities (Hovil, 2014; UNHCR, 2011, p. 34). Crisp (2004, p. 2) noted that it is only a durable solution when naturalization occurs, eliminating the need for international protection. However, despite being the most widely used solution, local integration faces challenges, particularly in developing countries, due to resource scarcity, economic stagnation, and social tensions. Responsibility-sharing within the international community is essential to prevent host society fatigue (Türk & Garlick, 2016; UNHCR, 2005).

Another durable solution, **resettlement** is defined as "the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them—as refugees—with permanent residence status" (UNHCR, 2011, p. 3). Unlike asylum, resettlement is not governed by international law, giving admission states wide discretion (Welfens, 2023, p. 1105). It is not a right but a protection tool (United Nations, 2018, para. 90), especially for groups in vulnerable situations (de Boer & Zieck, 2020, p. 3). The process involves identifying individuals or groups in vulnerable situations and prioritizing cases based on urgency. In the early stages of displacement, priority is given to those with legal or physical protection needs, individuals with medical conditions, survivors of torture or violence, women and girls at risk, those seeking family reunification, and children at risk; only later, when no other durable solution is foreseeable (UNHCR, 2011, p. 37), are other groups considered for resettlement. However, resettlement quotas are insufficient to meet resettlement needs. The UNHCR's (2024b) **Projected Global Resettlement Needs Report** shows that only 96,311 refugees from all nationalities were resettled globally in

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2023. The United States, Canada, and Germany are the primary recipient countries for UNHCR-facilitated resettlements. In Türkiye, 13,924 refugees departed for resettlement in 2023 (UNHCR, 2024b), though this is a small fraction of those in need. Nevertheless, according to the report, nearly 3 million refugees needed resettlement in 2025, with Syrian refugees making up about one third of that number (UNHCR, 2024b).

The shortfall of institutional resettlement schemes is not only limited to restricted quotas but also to long bureaucratic procedures that affect the (im)mobility of refugees while waiting in "transit" countries (Yıldız & Sert, 2021). These procedures compel institutions to prioritize the most vulnerable, raising questions about who "deserves" resettlement (Kocak, 2020). This occurs in the context of a shift from rights-based frameworks to neoliberal humanitarianism, where individualized responsibility, discretionary assessments of vulnerability, and the involvement of non-state actors are increasingly influential (Brown, 2017; Fineman, 2010; Jacobsen, 2024; Sözer, 2020). As institutional resettlement chances are extremely low, refugees often pursue alternative pathways, such as higher education and employment opportunities, to seek safety in a third country. Therefore, our analysis of vulnerability associated with relocation to a third country is based on two forms: (a) resettlement via institutional schemes and (b) alternative pathways through education and employment in other countries. By addressing the alternative resettlement pathways of Syrian refugee youth alongside formal resettlement programs, this study highlights the agency of refugees in shaping their futures, whereas existing literature has often emphasized the institutional and bureaucratic dimensions of resettlement processes.

Moving beyond the conceptualization of vulnerability in institutional schemes as stemming from innate characteristics (Flegar, 2018), we understand vulnerability as a combination of multiple factors, including not only innate but also structural and situational vulnerabilities. **Structural vulnerability** refers to the disadvantages migrants face due to systemic inequalities, institutionalized discrimination, and restrictive migration laws and policies that limit opportunities across various life domains, such as education and employment (Gilodi et al., 2024). **Situational vulnerability** involves transient and contingent conditions arising from interactions between individuals and their environment, particularly when engaging with institutions, facing material challenges, or interacting with different communities, with effects that may extend beyond the duration of the triggering events or circumstances (Gilodi et al., 2024).

Understanding vulnerability as multidimensional helps us challenge the shortcomings of its common usage. The first shortcoming is the essentialization of certain migrant groups as inherently vulnerable. Vulnerability varies across factors such as gender, age, and health; however, when these factors are understood in essentialist terms, it undermines the structural grounds of inequality and prioritizes these factors as individual traits. Such labelling risks reproducing a "hierarchy of vulnerability" (Heidbrink, 2021) or "differential inclusion" (Jacobsen, 2024), where "deservingness" is narrowed to specific categories, leading to a "redistribution of vulnerability" that jeopardizes relations within and outside migrant populations (Sözer, 2020; see also Smith & Waite, 2019; Sözer, 2019; Welfens, 2023). Scholars focusing on structural vulnerability underscore systems of inequality shaped by institutions and resources, rather than indi-

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vidual circumstances or characteristics, which are embedded in these broader structures (Brown et al., 2017; Szkupinski Quiroga et al., 2014; Virokannas et al., 2020).

Second, vulnerability discourses often pathologize migrants and use paternalistic language, portraying them as problems to solve or victims to save, undermining their agency (Brown, 2017; Butler et al., 2016; Klassen, 2022). For instance, research shows how the UK's resettlement program for Syrian refugees reinforced gendered, racialized, and colonial notions of vulnerability by victimizing women and children (Turner, 2015) while also creating new vulnerabilities through restrictive border policies and social control (Armbruster, 2019; Smith & Waite, 2019). Furthermore, the notion of "women as vulnerable" implies "men as invulnerable," creating gendered, paternalistic views that exclude men from protection and label them as threats (Jacobsen, 2024; Sözer, 2019; Turner, 2019; Welfens, 2023).

All these interventions reveal the complexity of the term **vulnerability** and the detrimental consequences of its use as a buzzword (Hruschka & Leboeuf, 2019). This complexity involves multiple multi-layered vulnerabilities, which emerge at various stages of the migration journey. For refugees, each option (local integration, voluntary repatriation, resettlement) carries distinct vulnerabilities. Local integration may involve discrimination, legal barriers, and social isolation, while returning home can bring risks of conflict, poor infrastructure, and economic instability (İçduygu & Aksel, 2022). Similarly, resettlement often entails complex legal processes, long waits, and challenges related to adapting to a new environment (Bryant et al., 2024).

Equally important, understanding vulnerability throughout the resettlement process (before, during, and after) is essential, just as it is for all stages of the migration journey. Before resettlement, refugees may experience uncertainty and anxiety about their future, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities (Bryant et al., 2024; Mendola & Pera, 2022). During resettlement, the process of relocation itself can expose refugees to new risks, such as exploitation and inadequate living conditions. After resettlement, refugees must navigate the challenges of integration, including securing employment, accessing services, and building social networks. It is also important to identify the interconnections between vulnerabilities at each stage of resettlement. For example, pre-resettlement experiences can influence one's ability to adapt during and after resettlement. Similarly, the support systems available during resettlement can affect long-term integration outcomes (Brown, 2017). Furthermore, the temporal experiences of different stages of migration can vary among refugees depending on their life stage. In particular, young refugees face unique vulnerabilities throughout the resettlement process (Bradby et al., 2017; Bryant et al., 2024; Gilodi et al., 2023; Heidbrink, 2021; Ní Raghallaigh & Thornton, 2017).

It must be noted that this study's emphasis on youth extends beyond traditional life stages approaches. Given the diversity within the category of "youth," as also reflected in our participants' experiences, not all refugees of similar ages undergo the same age-dependent life transitions. Although participants share similar ages, factors such as being young parents, varying levels of education, and differing economic advantages shape distinct life course trajectories and pathways. Similarly, based on the resettlement narratives in our research, we avoid using the word **aspirations** in our analysis to prevent conceptual confusion, opting instead for **imaginaries** (Müller-Funk et al., 2023). Unlike aspirations, which refer

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to specific desires and goals, imaginaries encompass how individuals conceptualize and make sense of those goals within their social realities, shaping their perceptions of the future. Therefore, imaginaries include not only hopes and desires but also fears and uncertainties, reflecting a broader and more fluid, yet consistent, picture of the complex and often unstable circumstances refugee youth face.

SETTING: SYRIANS IN TÜRKIYE

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Türkiye, like Syria's other neighbouring countries Jordan and Lebanon, has emerged as a significant destination for Syrian refugees. By 2014, the number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye had already exceeded 1 million; this figure increased to 2.5 million by 2015 and 3 million by 2016 (İçduygu & Millet, 2016). As of 2024, the total number of Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Türkiye exceeded 3 million. This figure does not include nearly a quarter of a million Syrians who have been naturalized and obtained Turkish citizenship, nor the approximately 200,000 Syrians who hold permanent residence permits in the country, all of whom arrived since 2011. (These figures represent rough estimates obtained from interviews conducted by researchers with officials from the PMM in 2024.) Consequently, Türkiye has become home to the largest Syrian refugee community in the world. Initially, the Turkish government perceived the influx and presence of Syrian refugees as a temporary and short-term phenomenon, a view broadly shared by Turkish society, which exhibited a degree of acceptance toward these refugees in their communities.

Under the geographical reservation permitted by the 1951 Refugee Convention and lifted by the 1967 Protocol, Türkiye grants refugee status only to applicants originating in Europe. Until 2013, Türkiye had lacked legislation on international protection; its asylum system solely operated under a 1994 regulation, which provided neither adequate legal protection nor sufficient administrative capacity. Therefore, during the early period, no formal mechanisms were in place to grant the refugees any legal status; refugees were often referred to as "guests" and received a basic protection scheme in the camps where they resided (Kirişci, 2014). As the number of refugees surpassed 1 million in 2014 and it became evident that the Syrian crisis was not a transient event, the Turkish government began implementing formal arrangements. These included granting temporary protection status; providing work permits, albeit with certain restrictions; and enhancing access to social services such as education, health care, and housing, as many began living outside the camps, primarily dispersing in urban areas across the country. The temporary protection arrangement established a registration system for Syrian refugees, granting them formal protection and access to assistance. This framework also served as a governance tool, facilitating integration and enabling arrangements for resettlement and return.

The years 2015 and 2016 proved pivotal, yielding a range of paradoxical outcomes (Rygiel et al., 2016). In 2015, a significant number of refugees traversed Türkiye en route to Europe, prompting "alarm" among European nations and leading to the labelling of the situation as a "refugee crisis." Moreover, 2016 was marked by the EU–Türkiye deal, which raised critical questions regarding the long-term fate of Syrian refugees. This deal, an informal agreement between the European Union and Türkiye addressing a type of "responsibility-sharing" in managing the Syrian refugee question, prompted discussions about whether these

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individuals would remain in Türkiye for the foreseeable future, whether they would have the opportunity to return to their homeland, and if there were prospects for resettlement in third countries. The 2016 deal stipulated that Türkiye would take back all migrants who crossed into Greece irregularly, while the EU would resettle a corresponding number of Syrian refugees from Türkiye. Additionally, the EU pledged to provide financial assistance to Türkiye to support the integration and welfare of these refugees, offering "3 plus 3 billion Euros" until 2024 (European Parliament, 2016). This financial support was crucial in alleviating some of the burdens on Türkiye, which had been grappling with the socio-economic impacts of hosting such a large number of refugees. This support was also essential in improving refugees' living conditions and enhancing their access to education, health care, and other services.

However, as time progressed, it became increasingly evident that the financial support provided by the EU has not effectively addressed the living conditions of Syrian refugees in Türkiye or facilitated their integration into local communities (Heck & Hess, 2017). The ongoing conflict in Syria has precluded any viable conditions for return, and the prospects for resettlement remain limited. As a result of prolonged displacement and unmet needs within the large Syrian refugee population, many continue to endure precarious living conditions, which has heightened unease among host communities regarding their presence in neighbourhoods. This has fostered an escalating climate of anti-refugee sentiment within the Turkish public. In this complex environment, the Turkish government has adopted a somewhat ambiguous stance. On one hand, it has initiated measures aimed at promoting the integration of Syrian refugees, such as offering selective naturalization options enabling some Syrians to acquire Turkish citizenship. On the other hand, the government is simultaneously pursuing repatriation programs designed to facilitate the return of Syrians to northern Syria, an area under Turkish military control (İçduygu & Nimer, 2019). This dual approach reflects the government's attempt to balance domestic pressures and public sentiment with the need to manage the refugee situation effectively.

What was the concrete result of the EU–Türkiye deal for resettlements? One must note here that the resettlement aspects of the EU–Türkiye agreement have proven largely ineffective. This situation arose partly because Greece was unable to return refugees to Türkiye and partly because Türkiye was hesitant to implement the agreement. Since the inception of the agreement, approximately 68,000 Syrians have been resettled in various countries. Notably, only about two thirds of these individuals have found refuge in EU member states, while the remainder have relocated primarily to Canada and the United States (PMM, n.d.a).

This paradoxical policy environment and its implications reflect the uncertainties and insecurities that Syrian refugees must navigate, leading to a heightened sense of vulnerability regarding their future. It is within this context that the prospect of resettlement in a third country has emerged as a significant consideration for them. The lack of clarity surrounding their status and the inconsistent support from host communities exacerbate their precarious situation, prompting many refugees to look beyond Türkiye for potential solutions to their plight. Public reactions to the prolonged stay of Syrians under temporary protection have grown increasingly negative over time, while the government's stance on refugee integration has also weakened. This situation has

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created further distress for Syrian refugees. Consequently, the possibility of resettlement becomes a critical element in their search for stability and security.

The Syrian refugee population in Türkiye is relatively young; nearly four fifths of its members are under the age of 35 (İçduygu, 2024). As of December 2024, approximately 875,000 Syrian children had been born in Türkiye; however, considerable uncertainty remains about their legal status (Anadolu Ajansı, 2024). On the one hand, Türkiye does not grant citizenship based on jus soli. On the other hand, legislation in Syria does not ensure that women transmit their Syrian nationality to their children. These factors, combined with the loss of documentation due to the conflict, heighten the risk of statelessness (Refugee Rights Türkiye & European Network on Statelessness, 2024). It is not surprising that youth are among the most sensitive groups of Syrian refugees, particularly concerned about their future options of remaining in Türkiye, resettling in another country, or returning to Syria. This is not only due to their demographic characteristics but also because they encounter significant challenges associated with critical transitions in their life stages, such as education, family formation (e.g., marriage), and the shift from schooling to employment. Within this context, the prospect of resettlement in another country emerges as a significant concern for these young individuals.

It is essential to emphasize that the precarious circumstances faced by refugee youth result from multiple factors contributing to inadequate conditions in housing, education, employment, and access to social and health services (Baban et al., 2021). Equally important is the reality that these young refugees are subjected to a state of permanent temporariness (İçduygu & Sert, 2019). While the norm of temporariness has become prevalent in contemporary refugee protection frameworks, many refugees endure extended periods of waiting for formal and permanent status (İçduygu & Sert, 2019). Although this practice of maintaining refugees in a state of limbo may align with the interests of states, it undoubtedly inflicts significant harm on refugees and represents a fundamental injustice (Buxton, 2023; İçduygu, 2024). Indeed, the injustices observed in the experiences of Syrian youth in Türkiye can be seen as a primary structural factor contributing to their vulnerability at various stages of their life cycle and throughout their—past or planned—migratory journeys.

SYRIAN YOUTH IN TÜRKIYE: PAST AND CURRENT EXPERIENCES AND FUTURE IMAGINARIES

This section explores the lived experiences of Syrian youth in Türkiye, focusing on their present conditions and future imaginaries of resettlement in a third country.

Our research was reviewed and approved by the Koç University Ethics Committee for Social Sciences.

To explore the experiences of Syrian youth in Türkiye, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with Syrian youth aged 18–35. Interviews were conducted between June and August 2024 in various settings, including online meetings, phone calls, cafeterias, and university meeting rooms. All were private, one-on-one sessions. Questions addressed participants' backgrounds, living conditions in Türkiye, migration preferences, and perceived challenges associated with staying, returning, or resettling in a third country through institutional programs or independently. In addition to the interviews, we engaged in limited participant observation in neighbourhoods with high refugee populations and at a gathering place owned by Syrians where youth socialize. These visits

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allowed us to have spontaneous conversations with refugees. We conducted 14 interviews: 9 participants were seeking to resettle independently in a third country, while 5 had been accepted in resettlement programs and are awaiting travel. All interviewees had been residing in Türkiye for 6–12 years, with one exception of 3 years. At the time, they lived in Istanbul but previously resided in other cities, except for two participants who lived in Ankara and Gaziantep. Our interviewees included eight women and six men: nine were single, two were divorced with children, and three were married with children. Those seeking to resettle independently were university students or graduates, some of whom were employed, while others lived with their families. In contrast, those in the resettlement program were families with children who generally had lower levels of educational attainment and fewer employment opportunities. We accessed refugees through snowballing and an international organization. Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic (via an interpreter: An Egyptian native Arabic speaker interpreted the interviews; a non-Syrian interpreter was preferred to avoid participants' potential discomfort), or Turkish, lasting between 30 minutes and 1 hour. They were voice-recorded or handwritten, depending on consent, and all identifying information was anonymized, with pseudonyms used. As Table 1 shows, our interviewees are divided into two distinct groups: those in resettlement programs and those outside of them seeking alternative pathways through education and employment.

Formal resettlement is a selective and structured process in which various actors such as UNHCR, national authorities, and resettlement agencies work together. Eligibility is determined based on vulnerability criteria described in official guidelines. Refugees selected for a formal resettlement scheme (e.g., those heading to EU and North American countries) are primarily chosen based on their innate vulnerabilities, such as physical as well as social conditions that meet UNHCR criteria. Selected refugees are then assessed through interviews, screening procedures, and security checks. The duration of resettlement procedures varies depending on the country of resettlement. Upon their arrival, various integration programs are implemented to facilitate refugees' adaptation in their new host communities. For instance, individuals like Lina (a cleaner, divorced with four children) and Amina (divorced, single mother) exhibit substantial vulnerability factors, making them eligible for resettlement. Nabil and his family's situation is particularly challenging, as two of his children are ill and require treatment, exacerbating their vulnerability. His case demonstrates multiple layers of vulnerability including economic instability, health issues, and structural deficiencies that align with the UNHCR's eligibility criteria for resettlement.

On the other hand, those outside the resettlement program, such as highly educated individuals, NGO workers, and professionals, do not initially appear to have innate vulnerabilities. Yet, during our conversations, it became clear that most of them experience deeper layers of structural and situational vulnerabilities that are not immediately visible. They are aware that they are unlikely to be selected for formal resettlement. Therefore, they focus on searching for complementary pathways to move to a third country.

Youth is not a homogeneous category; nor do the participants of this study fit neatly into one. As described above and shown in Table 1, interviewees vary in terms of gender, education, employment, family characteristics, and resettlement pathways. This

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Table 1

Interviewee Characteristics

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital status, children	Occupation	Education	Time spent in Türkiye	RP[a] / AP
1	Mahmoud	18	Man	Single	Student	Tertiary (in progress)	6 years	AP
2	Kareem	18	Man	Single	Student	Tertiary (in progress)	3 years	AP
3	Salma	23	Woman	Single	Part-time translator	Tertiary (in progress)	12 years	AP
4	Yasmin	30	Woman	Single	NGO worker	Tertiary	6 years	AP
5	Marwa	28	Woman	Single	Content writer & social media manager	Tertiary	7 years	AP
6	Leila	35	Woman	Single	Business: art cafe owner	Tertiary	11 years	AP
7	Tarek	30	Man	Single	Art: musician & actor	Tertiary	6 years	AP
8	Rasha	23	Woman	Single	Student	Tertiary (in progress)	7 years	AP
9	Ahmad	25	Man	Single	Dentist	Tertiary (in progress)	11 years	AP
10	Lina	28	Woman	Divorced, 4 children	Cleaner	Middle school or below	9 years	RP: EU country

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Table 1

Continued.

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital status, children	Occupation	Education	Time spent in Türkiye	RP[a] / AP
11	Samer	25	Men	Married, 4 children	Factory worker (food)	Middle school or below	10 years	RP: EU country
12	Amina	33	Woman	Divorced, 1 child	Not working	Vocational	10 years	RP: North American country
13	Nabil	33	Men	Married, 4 children	Unemployed (construction worker)	Middle school or below	8 years	RP: EU country
14	Zainab	19	Woman	Married, pregnant	Not working	Middle school	11 years	RP: EU country

Note. RP = resettlement program; AP = alternative pathways.

[a] For the purposes of ensuring anonymity, the countries of resettlement for five participants whose applications were approved are anonymized as EU and North American countries.

diversity is reflected in their imaginaries of resettlement, as demonstrated in the following sections. It also underlines the analysis's concern, not to generalize but to give youth experiences space to explore vulnerabilities within resettlement imaginaries.

Past and Current Experiences

All the Syrians we interviewed spent significant portions of their early years as refugees in Türkiye and had not yet resettled in a third country. Whether on institutional resettlement schemes or alternative pathways, they shared a commonality: Their future imaginaries were deeply rooted in their present conditions and associated vulnerabilities. We examined these vulnerabilities as arising from a combination of three forms: structural, situational, and innate (Gilodi et al., 2024; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Mendola & Pera, 2022).

Syrian youth narratives reveal that structural vulnerability arises from deficiencies in the legal and institutional framework, affecting mobility and access to health care, education, and employment. Due to Türkiye's maintenance of the geographical limitation on the 1951 Refugee Convention, Syrians in Türkiye are granted temporary protection rather than full refugee status. However, since the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) came into force in 2014, a number of changes have occurred in the asylum regime, particularly following the declaration of the state of emergency in July 2016 after the failed coup attempt (Ineli-Ciger, 2018). In line with the existing literature (e.g., Baban et al., 2017; İçduygu & Aksel, 2022; Rottmann & Kaya, 2021; Sengul, 2022), our empirical data also emphasize the impact of specific restrictions on Syrians and the inconsistencies within the asylum regime and its implementation. Particularly, limitations on freedom of movement, challenges in accessing health care, difficulties in obtaining work permits, and financial barriers to higher education appear as the main inconsistencies in the implementation of temporary protection.

One of the most stringent measures is the limitation on freedom of movement. Temporary protection holders are required to reside in the provinces where they are registered and must obtain a travel authorization document to move between provinces. During our fieldwork, one interviewee, Yasmin, explained that she chose to stay in Türkiye on a tourist visa (an expensive option) rather than apply for temporary protection due to restrictions on freedom of movement. Another interviewee, Amina, repeatedly underlined the hardship caused by these travel restrictions. Amina, who had lived in one of the provinces most severely impacted by the earthquake, was forced to relocate to another city. Yet, she noted that changing the location on the temporary protection ID is very difficult, and she feared being caught and deported as a result of moving without proper authorization.

Health care is another concern that was raised. While temporary protection provides access, the system is often disorganized and inconsistent, and refugees face issues such as discriminatory treatment, language barriers, inadequate support, and complex appointment procedures (Baban et al., 2021; Göç Araştırmaları Derneği, 2020; Kaya & Kıraç, 2016). Our interviewee Ahmad, who had lived in Türkiye for 11 years, noted that his Arabic name drew unwanted attention in hospitals, prompting "strange" looks and questions from staff and patients when it appeared on the doctor's screen. Accessing health care is particularly difficult for refugees needing urgent treatment. One interviewee, Nabil, a 33-year-old unemployed man with a family of four, struggled to find care for his seriously ill children due to financial

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and logistical constraints. He switched to Turkish during the interview to express his desperation, despite his limited fluency. His family, having lived in Türkiye for 8 years, was about to be resettled in an EU country for better care.

For students, education, especially high tuition fees, is a significant concern. Despite regulations since the early 2010s offering exemptions and scholarships, fewer than 2% of Syrians had attended or graduated from university by 2017 (A. Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018, p. 264). In recent years, these scholarship exemptions have been dismantled, and Syrian refugees are now subject to international student tuition fees, which, according to the interviewees, can be as high as $20,000. One interviewee, Kareem, an 18-year-old graduate considering university in Germany, felt he was "living a better life than most Syrians here," with "a house, food, drink, internet, and a mobile phone," but he also emphasized the financial barriers: "The most important thing I have to say that made me want to go is not equality or something. It's the money, to be honest. Like, for example, the tuition fees." Türkiye's ongoing economic crisis further weakens refugee youth employment prospects. This was evident among educated Syrians, who reported lower wages and sought opportunities in third countries, and less-educated Syrians, who worked informally and relied on aid, as seen in all five Syrians we interviewed whose resettlement was approved.

Research shows Syrian students face additional challenges such as language barriers, complex application processes, and experiences of discrimination (Dereli, 2021; A. Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018; Ertong Attar & Küçükşen, 2019; Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017; Yıldız, 2019). Marwa, a 28-year-old graduate seeking opportunities in Europe, described her "horrible experiences," including mishandled academic records and lecturers using Turkish despite her requests for English. She also explained how she failed her exchange program exam:

> The teacher during the test told me, "Go back to your country! Why are you doing this? Why are you taking this opportunity from Turkish students? You don't deserve this! You already took a lot of help from the EU! Why are you still taking more help? Are you just applying so you can apply as an asylum seeker when you get to Germany?" It was the worst 6 months, I would say, of my entire life in Türkiye, with the amount of racism and discrimination that I faced.

This narrative shows how structural and situational vulnerabilities combine to reinforce integration challenges and local hostility. The concepts of social cohesion and harmonization are relatively new within the framework of Türkiye's migration policy, first appearing in the LFIP in 2013 (A. Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2018). Article 96 mandates the Directorate General of Migration Management to take necessary steps and to implement measures for cohesion among the host community and the foreigners, international protection applicants and holders, as well as institutional co-operation. Both the LFIP and the 2018 report prepared by the Refugee Rights Sub-Commission of the Turkish Grand National Assembly Human Rights Investigation Commission underline that harmonization efforts in Türkiye are intended neither as assimilation nor integration (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2018). While the authorities are clear about what harmonization does not mean, the policies remain vague. Although promotion of living peacefully and culture of coexistence appears as the policy priorities (Türk Kızılayı, 2020), various studies indicate increasing anti-refugee discourse of political parties and negative public attitude toward Syrians together (e.g., Alakoc et al., 2022; Onay-Coker, 2019; Ozerim & Tolay, 2021; Saylan & Aknur, 2023).

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Most interviewees reported experiencing discriminatory behaviours, particularly during the election period, when anti-refugee discourses were heightened by nationalist parties. For instance, Marwa, who completed her BA studies in Türkiye, told us that some of her Turkish classmates stopped talking to her and even blocked her on their social media accounts during the election campaigns even though there was no specific dispute between them. Almost all interviewees agreed that discriminatory behaviours or racism could occur anywhere, but some expressed concern that, unlike in Western countries where they hoped to be resettled, authorities in Türkiye would not conduct proper investigations into such incidents.

Structural and situational vulnerabilities have entrenched refugees' feelings of insecurity and fear of deportation in daily interactions. The fear of being identified as Syrian in public spaces such as schools, hospitals, and public transportation was common. Our interviewee, Salma, shared that in high school, the principal introduced her as German to avoid bullying. At university, she noted that her peers did not believe she was Syrian and often treated being Syrian as an insult, saying she did not "look Syrian." For Salma, not looking Syrian became a protective measure against bullying in high school and a form of social capital at university that facilitated her networking with peers, where she "improved" herself further by becoming fluent in Turkish. Rasha, who "looked Syrian," shared her feelings about concealing her identity in public:

> When I identify as Syrian, I feel like I'm guilty for something that I didn't do. I feel like that's a cult on its own. I can't live with my true self. I'm afraid to open a book on the metro and read in Arabic. I used to do that, but now I don't. Now I think before doing it, and that's just a basic requirement for anyone to speak in their own language. That's kind of annoying. We shouldn't have to think about it. It's just our own language and our daily lives.

All the Syrians emphasized increased racism and discrimination in various aspects of life, which fuelled their desire to resettle in a third country despite their initial plans to integrate into Turkish society. The racist attacks in Kayseri in June 2024,[1] though not widely reported, significantly heightened their insecurity and made them reconsider their future in Türkiye. For instance, this event led one of our interviewees, Ahmad, and his family to change their surname to a Turkish one so that "no one will realize they are foreigners." After 12 years in Türkiye, obtaining citizenship, becoming fluent in Turkish, and securing a degree and job, Ahmad believed changing the family's Arabic surname would remove the last publicly visible sign of their Syrian identity. It is worth noting that 3 of the 14 interviewees had obtained Turkish citizenship. However, although they acknowledged certain benefits of citizenship compared with temporary protection status, this was not sufficient motivation to remain in Türkiye, as their safety concerns were stronger and tied to the hope that a third country would offer better prospects. Ahmad was even concerned about the permanence of citizenship, citing rumours: "We see people whose citizenship has been revoked for criticizing Türkiye." Another interviewee, Leila, a 35-year-old business owner, mentioned that many of her Syrian friends, including those who had been settled in Türkiye for a while, decided to leave Türkiye following the events in Kayseri. This insecurity was exacerbated by the fear of deportation, even over minor conflicts with locals who might report them, raising

[1] An alleged attack on a young girl by a Syrian national in central Türkiye at the end of June triggered widespread anti-Syrian violence. Racist attacks spread to several neighbourhoods, with up to 2,000 rioters targeting hundreds of shops, cars, and homes over 3 nights before authorities intervened (Bourcier, 2024).

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concerns of being sent back to Syria, a place none of the refugees considered returning to. Leila was also a Turkish citizen and, like Ahmad, stated that safety concerns and the economic crisis, which made running a business difficult, were prompting her to close her business and seek to move to Europe as her siblings had done.

The state of insecurity had gendered implications, particularly for women living alone or as single mothers. One manifestation was financial insecurity. For example, one interviewee, Lina, a single mother of four, relied on informal cleaning jobs or help from neighbours, while another interviewee, Amina, a single mother of one, remained unemployed. Both women lacked proficiency in Turkish, had weak ties to both Turkish and Syrian communities, and were unable to secure formal employment due to childcare responsibilities. Both were awaiting resettlement at the time of the interviews. Gendered implications also appeared as threats of violence; Marwa, a young single woman with no knowledge of Turkish and no community ties, described feeling "terrified" when she first moved into an apartment alone:

> The landlord started harassing me, knocking on my door after midnight because he knew I was alone. He came the first day, I guess at 1:00 a.m., and kept knocking on the door aggressively for about half an hour. I was so scared because I didn't know anyone in the whole building. … I couldn't do anything. The second day, I was terrified because he came again and did the same thing. By the third day, I started looking for a new apartment and found one inside a compound.

When moving out, her landlord threatened, "I'm gonna tell the police. I'm gonna put you in prison. I'm gonna send you back to Syria." While she considered reporting it 5 years ago, Marwa said, "If this happened today, I wouldn't dare because even if you're the one violated, you could be deported." Her past experiences crossing the Syrian–Turkish border left her "traumatized by anyone in uniform in Türkiye," further deepening her mistrust and fear of public officials.

These experiences reveal how gender profoundly shapes the precarity faced by Syrian refugee women, intertwining financial insecurity with threats to personal safety. The intersection of caregiving responsibilities, language barriers, and social isolation exacerbates their vulnerability, underscoring the urgency of accessible protection and support. These gendered vulnerabilities, especially for refugees with children, also influence how Syrian youth imagine their future or desired resettlement countries, fuelling their hopes for safety, stability, and dignity beyond their current circumstances in Türkiye.

Future Imaginaries of Resettlement

The future imaginaries of resettlement for Syrian youth, whether through institutional schemes or alternative pathways, are shaped by their current conditions in Türkiye. All of them aspire to safer, more stable living conditions and better protection in a third country. However, our research reveals a clear distinction between two groups of interviewees regarding their resettlement pathways. Those awaiting formal resettlement viewed moving to a third country as nearly impossible without the assistance provided by resettlement programs. Conversely, those seeking to resettle independently perceives these programs as having overly restrictive eligibility criteria and lengthy procedures. This perception led them to believe they would face long delays or might not qualify at all. Consequently, they considered alternative pathways, such as education or employment, to be more viable options.

The divergence between these groups extends beyond resettlement pathways and is reflected in their varying levels of hope and optimism about life after resettlement. In-

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terviewees awaiting formal resettlement expressed greater optimism about their future in third countries, primarily due to the assistance they received from international organizations throughout the process, which addressed financial needs and provided access to essential information. In contrast, those pursuing alternative pathways remained hopeful but expressed concerns about documentation, financial burdens, and potential social and cultural challenges. For both groups, access to public services, particularly health care and educational opportunities, emerged as a fundamental factor in their resettlement imaginaries. Our interviews revealed a close interconnection between life and resettlement expectations. Parents often emphasized their desire to "guarantee" their children's future in narratives of post-resettlement life. For instance, Samer repeatedly stated during the interview, "I lost my life in Syria but expect that at least I can guarantee my kids' lives and future once we move to that EU country."

The optimism of young refugees seeking to resettle independently is often tempered by harsh realities and mixed accounts from friends and relatives already resettled in Europe. They face the challenges of starting over and ongoing uncertainty about the future. Believing resettlement programs have strict criteria and complex processes, many opt to obtain visas for education. One interviewee, Yasmin, explained why she preferred securing a visa over "resettling as a refugee":

> I can migrate through education rather than going as a refugee, ending up in a camp, waiting, studying, and integrating. … No, no, it's not my preferred approach to resettle or move to a third country. I think the [institutional scheme] takes too much time. I feel, as a young person, I don't have much time to lose.

The reluctance toward institutional schemes stems not only from their complexity but also from the very status of "refugee," as another interviewee, Marwa, explained: "I don't want to apply for resettlement, to be honest. I'm done with the word refugee. I don't want to be called a refugee anymore." Marwa's family was resettled to Sweden, but since she had turned 18, she was left in Syria and later crossed the Turkish border alone. Since arriving in Türkiye in 2017, she had applied for visas to several EU countries for job and education purposes to reunite with her family, but all applications were rejected. Based on her job applications across Europe, including Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, and France, she noted, "It's hard to get a job opportunity in Europe when you are wearing a hijab and your name is Marwa."

Resettlement prospects also involve potential integration difficulties. While those whose resettlement was approved felt hopeful about starting anew, others still seeking to migrate experienced mixed feelings shaped by their past migration experiences and stories from those already resettled. For students who spent their formative years in Türkiye, resettlement often meant "starting from zero." One of them, Mahmoud, an 18-year-old student with many friends resettled in Germany, had mixed feelings about leaving. After 3 years in Türkiye, he felt culturally closer to Türkiye and wanted to integrate before considering resettlement. Believing that "racism is everywhere," he explained: "I've already established a life here; all I have to do is integrate into it. But if I go to Germany, I'll have to relearn the language and start from zero."

Kareem, another 18-year-old university student planning to migrate to Germany, shared similar concerns about "language and learning how to live in a new environment." He was particularly concerned about what he had heard from resettled Syrians:

> Syrians in Germany don't want more Syrians to come because they know that if more Syrians

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> come, there will be the same problems. Like definitely Türkiye, where in the beginning, when Syrians came to Türkiye, Turkish people treated them very good, they gave them homes and everything. But when all Syrians came, they began treating us differently. They now want us to go back to our country. I don't want the same problem to happen in other countries.

Kareem added that although "they're living a million times better," Syrians in Germany intentionally portray "a bad picture" due to fears of increasing unacceptance.

Consequently, an evolving mix of factors shapes Syrian youth's imaginaries of resettlement, including incoherent migration policies, politicized migration in Türkiye, institutional mobility barriers, and the ongoing insecurity faced by resettled Syrians. These factors contribute to persistent anxiety and uncertainty about not only where and how to resettle but also where to establish a sense of belonging and a permanent home.

CONCLUSION

In our article, we focused on the question of vulnerability of Syrian youth in Türkiye, especially in the context of resettlement. Our research provides an analysis of their experiences and perceptions and explores how vulnerability has multi-faceted dimensions and is influenced not only by individual experiences but also by structural and situational factors. Even though vulnerability is often framed in institutional settings through categories such as age, gender, and health situation, the experiences of refugees reveal a more complex picture of vulnerability.

While the traditional understanding of vulnerability became an essential part of the selective criteria for institutional resettlement due to the limited availability, our findings show how structural and situational aspects of vulnerability remain important for the decision-making process and the form of the resettlement. Our interviewees, many of whom had spent a significant amount of time in Türkiye, faced multi-faceted challenges not fully captured by traditional vulnerability assessments. The experiences of the Syrian refugees we interviewed highlight the deep-rooted difficulties Syrian refugees face under Türkiye's temporary protection regime. Their vulnerabilities are shaped by a combination of structural, situational, and innate factors. Yet, the uncertainty of the future of their legal status, the inconsistencies in the migration policies, increasing anti-refugee public and political discourses, and the economic hardships contribute to a state of "permanent temporariness," which aggravates their precarity over time. Therefore, our research contributes to a deeper understanding of how vulnerability is experienced in a protracted refugee situation and moves beyond the inherent vulnerability categories often used in institutional frameworks, notably the formal resettlement schemes.

Consequently, this study both recognizes and reveals the diversity and multiplicity inherent in refugees' experiences, challenging singular or fixed notions of vulnerability, youth, and resettlement. By acknowledging the intersecting social, economic, and political factors that shape their lives, the analysis underscores the need for nuanced approaches that address the varied realities and perspectives of young refugees. This multiplicity calls for policies and interventions that are flexible and responsive to the complex, layered nature of vulnerability and resettlement imaginaries.

The future imaginaries of Syrian youth regarding resettlement are deeply intertwined with their past and present experiences in Türkiye. Both their hopes and concerns are shaped by these experiences. The pathways of resettlement are loaded with various obstacles. While resettlement programs offer

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structured support and generate optimism, they are also seen as slow and restrictive, leading many young Syrians to explore alternative routes, such as education or employment visas, or sometimes even riskier pathways. Therefore, governments should advance bilateral and/or multilateral agreements to increase the availability and expand the scope of legal pathways. In either case, refugees who manage to resettle often face new challenges following the resettlement into a third country related to integration, cultural challenges, and language barriers. While resettlement in third countries presents significant challenges for young Syrians, it is also a testament to their resilience and agency in the face of adversity. Despite feeling vulnerable in unfamiliar surroundings, they tend to demonstrate resilience and determination as they navigate the complexities of the resettlement process. By examining their experiences and perceptions, and highlighting their resilience, this study contributes to a broader understanding of refugee experiences on resettlement, particularly putting the agency of refugees at the forefront. However, our findings also emphasize refugees' hope and optimism for after resettlement. Syrian youth's hopes for resettlement are not only limited to escape from their current situation in Türkiye but also driven by their desire to build a more secure and stable future for themselves and their families. At this point, it is worth exploring further the relationship between their life and resettlement aspirations. By understanding how resettlement can serve refugees as a foundation for building a secure future in which refugees can shape their goals and motivations beyond resettlement, future studies can investigate effective programs that allow refugees to enhance their agency in realizing their aspirations.

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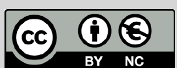

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