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# Building Borders in the City: the Turkish Government's Plan to "Dilute" the Migrant Presence in Urban Areas through the Example of the Altındağ Metropolitan District in Ankara

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## Abstract

This article intends to read the effects of European border externalization policies from the "south," taking into consideration Turkey's autonomy and local dynamics in bordering processes, which merge and intertwine with EU ones. Based on ethnographic fieldwork during 2022 and 2023 in the Altındağ metropolitan district of Ankara, I analyse how this urban borderland became the focal point of governmental practices and narratives after the anti-Syrian lynching that exploded in August 2021. An event that marked a new direction in the government's migration policies with the issuing of the so-called "dilution plan" which establishes a maximum threshold of 20 % of foreign residents in the neighborhoods of metropolitan areas like Ankara and in 63 other provinces with a huge migrant presence. I maintain that the Turkish government's "dilution plan" highlights how the border is above all a mobile threshold that marks a hierarchy between people within the same space, creating mechanisms of "differential inclusion". With this study, I aim to discuss how bordering processes and practices not only reconfigure the Mediterranean space but also mark the urban spaces of the countries involved, such as Turkey.

## Keywords

bordering, migration, national identity, urban enclaves, Turkey

## Introduction

The so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015, centred on the Balkan route, heightened Turkey's strategic role in migration governance, formalised in the EU-Turkey statement of 18 March 2016. This period shaped narrations and studies on migrations, not only in relation to border externalisation but also the role of cities in migrant inclusion and exclusion (Agier, 2018). Building on the idea of the border not as a mere geographic demarcation of national space but as a dispersed mechanism reproduced within urban settings (Mezzadra 2006), I undertook an ethnographic work during 2022 and 2023 in the Altındağ district of Ankara, which became a laboratory of governmental practices and narratives after the anti-Syrian lynching that exploded in August 2021.

On the night of August 10, a fight broke out between a group of young people from the Syrian and local communities in a park in the Altındağ district, resulting in the death of a young Turk and the serious injury of another young man. The news, which quickly circulated in the streets of the area and on social media, sparked a lynching against the migrant communities the following night, August 11.

With the participation of locals and also people from neighbouring districts, attacks and looting of workplaces, shops, and homes of not only Syrians, but also Afghans, ensued in several areas of Altındağ. The knowledge of the places to be attacked, and in particular the location of the migrants' homes, suggested an organised and planned attack without any effective and preventive attempts by institutions and police forces to stop it (Ayaşlıoğlu 2021).

This event marked a new direction in the government's migration policies with the issuing of the so-called "dilution plan" (*seyreltme planı*) which establishes a maximum threshold of 20% of foreign residents in the neighborhoods of metropolitan areas like Ankara and in 63 other provinces with a strong migrant presence (PMM, 2023). The Turkish government's "dilution plan" illustrates how the border operates as a mobile threshold, creating hierarchies among people within the same space and enabling mechanisms of "differential inclusion."(Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

In analysing the spatial dimension of these processes, I draw on Massey's (2005) concept of space as a "product of interrelations" and Lefebvre's (1974) idea of lived space. Massey highlights how space evolves through local and global interactions, which reshape it over time. Lefebvre examines daily experiences, personal interactions, and symbolic representations, highlighting how people assign meaning to physical spaces, which in turn shape their sense of belonging.

Identity, like the constant interpretation and reinterpretation of space, is not a natural and inevitable outcome of ancestral unity. Rather, it emerges as a complex discursive element from the "narrative of the self" via the construction of difference (Hall 1996), likewise shaped by the meaning of spaces.

In this sense, spaces actually take the form of complex entities located within and shaped by forces that go far beyond their fictional boundaries. The socially produced, relational, and lived dimension of space has guided my study of how inhabitants navigate and respond to urban and social transformations caused by the border regime.

In this article, I explore how borders, which are both material and imagined, serve as sites where the constitutive outside is defined in relation to the sovereign subject and citizen.

However, following Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), acts of bordering happen in far more places than the "border" itself, shaping urban spaces, identities, and social relations, drawing on the Turkish context as an example. In particular, I explore how bordering processes and practices in Turkey are defined in relation to sovereignty and citizenship. Then, I analyse how the Altındağ district of Ankara has become an urban borderland shaped by policies such as the dilution plan, which reconfigures the spatial and social landscape. Finally, I discuss how bordering processes in Turkey, reinforced by the EU's 2016 statement, turn cities into both laboratories for repressive practices and sites of contestation. In these places, migrants and solidarity networks develop counter-narratives and alternative spatial practices to challenge border governance.

## Literature review

The mass arrival of Syrians since 2011 and Turkey's transformation to the world's largest refugee host have shaped the interplay between migration governance and urban dynamics in Turkey, making it a significant field of inquiry. This shift has profoundly impacted urban spaces, where the majority of international migrants reside, and fueled a growing body of research exploring migrant experiences in urban contexts. Broader analyses of Turkey's migration regime further contextualise these localised experiences. Ataç et al.'s 2017 special issue of Movements Journal scrutinizes the EU-Turkey agreement and Turkey's temporary protection system as elements of a hybrid border regime, marked by selective inclusion, migrant insecurity, and resistance to rights violations. Similarly, in the special issue of the journal Beyond. Istanbul, published in 2019 by the association MAD (Mekanda Adalet Derneği), entitled Mekanda Adalet ve Mültecilik (Spatial Justice and Refugees), some of these aspects are further analysed, in particular the day-to-day interactions and lives of migrants in Turkey's various urban environments. The introduction highlights two key authors, Kristen Biehl and Sema Erder, among others. Both are leading researchers on the spatial dimension of migration in Turkey.

In numerous publications, Biehl (2015, 2016, 2020) has examined the question of belonging and the precarious condition of migrants in certain districts of Istanbul where there is a strong migratory presence.

Following these studies, recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the precarious legal and social conditions faced by Syrian migrants in cities. Yıldız and Uzgören (2016) highlight how Turkey's temporary protection regime inadequately addresses long-term inclusion, putting migrants in a state of uncertainty and precarity. However, their study of İzmir shows how migrants navigate and leverage seasonal and informal work opportunities, solidarity networks, and relatively safe and affordable living conditions in the city interstices.

Akçalı (2023) extends this discussion by examining the experiences of Syrian migrants in Adana, to analyse processes of place-making and re-territorialization that challenge the territorialising logic underpinning existing refugee regimes. Through her concept of "poor to poor, peer to peer," Akçalı illustrates how migrants establish transnational networks to navigate the margins of the global economy and society, thereby circumventing restrictive legal, political, and cultural frameworks. This perspective highlights the agency of migrants in reshaping the socio-spatial dynamics of their environments, as well as the emerging solidarities that support their everyday lives in marginalised urban contexts.

Other studies complement these insights by focusing on the intersectional dimensions of migrants' marginalisation and their ability to resist it. Acara and Özdemir (2023) explore the gendered dimensions of marginalisation by revealing how Syrian women in Izmir navigate socially and spatially segregated urban environments. Together, these works underscore the complex interplay between structural constraints and migrants strategies in urban settings.

My study builds upon and advances this literature by examining how the Turkish government's evolving strategies for managing migrant populations in urban areas underscore the concept of bordering, which underlines spatial practices delineating inclusion and exclusion within cities. For scholars writing about migration from the perspective of Europe, they often focus at the border of the EU. However, this approach locates the border only at one scale and in one primary site. We need a more complex account of bordering that focuses on both internal and external spatialities.

In this sense, I underline how contemporary migration management rooted in bordering practices, in the Turkish context, resonates with urban studies scholarship that explores the links between city landscapes and the ideological, political, and identity construction of the Turkish nation. Scholars such as Jongerden (2007, 2009), Öktem (2009), Kezer (2014, 2015), and Houston (2020) demonstrate how urban planning in Turkey has historically reinforced state ideologies, constructing spatial hierarchies aligned with narratives of Turkishness. These works emphasise urban spaces as a critical arena for negotiating belonging and exclusion.

Building on this literature, my study contributes to the debate on the urban dimension of migration in Turkey. I examine how acts of bordering unfold within cities, where sovereignty and citizenship are constantly renegotiated. Bordering processes do not just happen at territorial frontiers; they also materialise in urban spaces, shaping spatial practices and social relations. The Turkish government's "dilution plan" is a key example. This policy does not operate unilaterally; it intersects with the agency of migrants, who mobilise solidarity networks, enact everyday forms of resistance, and contest and navigate the constraints imposed by border regime in urban spaces.

## Methodology

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork of six months between 2022 and 2023 as part of my doctoral research project, which examines the daily life experiences of migrants with various statuses living in or passing through Ankara Altındağ district. I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with migrants living in the area coming from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran. They also include those carried out with historical local residents and representatives of collectives working on right to the city and migrants rights. The majority of the fieldwork is based on face-to-face interviews in Altindağ, where people we spoke to resided, as well as in public spaces like bars and cafés in other parts of the city. In addition, I collected data based on participant observation by taking part in guided walks in the affected neighborhoods and in various activities with locals, migrants, and community activists, such as meetings, expositions, and everyday tasks. I synthesised numerous spontaneous, unrecorded conversations in my field notebook, frequently utilising improvised tools such as papers and mobile phones. Thanks to their informality and spontaneity, they provided invaluable additional data to better understand the daily experiences and feelings of belonging of people living in Altindağ's margins.

The findings detail migrants' and locals' daily interactions within complex social and political environments. Friendships formed in these contexts revealed unique insights into the often hidden personal aspects of their daily lives, leading me to reflect on the use of this data and my positionality.

In this sense, the concept of "situated knowledges," introduced by feminist theorist Donna Haraway (1988), has profoundly influenced how I approach my work. Haraway does not simply argue that knowledge is shaped by positionality; rather, she contends that all knowledge is produced within historically and materially constructed positions that must be interrogated. She critiques the notion of detached, all-seeing objectivity, emphasising that all perspectives, including those of the subjugated and marginalized, are partial and embedded in power relations. Importantly, she argues that we must take responsibility for what we learn how to see. This means not only acknowledging the ways in which our position affects our gaze but also questioning how categories of privilege and marginalisation are themselves constructed and sustained through broader structures of power. This notion resonates deeply with me, particularly in my research on marginalised and racialised communities, especially migrants, in Turkey, a context shaped by the geopolitical dynamics of European border regimes that actively endanger lives. As a white European male, I recognise that my presence in the field is not neutral. My faculty to move across borders, conduct research, and have my work recognised by academic institutions is contingent on privileges that are denied to the people I study. At the same time, my positionality is not a fixed identity but rather a shifting and relational construction. My knowledge of Turkish, gained through university studies in Italy and years living in Turkey, allowed me to conduct most interviews in Turkish, though some were in English, Arabic, Persian, or Pashto with the help of intermediaries. However, my language skills did not erase the power imbalances inherent in the research process. Perceptions of me as a foreign European researcher added complexity to my reflections on positionality. While some welcomed me, others were sceptical. I remember an Afghan woman telling me, "It is very important what you do for us; you make our voice and our suffering heard." This moment of connection was meaningful, but I also faced critical moments, such as demands for payment or requests to verify my credentials. These interactions highlighted how my position shaped my access to knowledge. Recognising this has pushed me to rethink traditional research power dynamics. Rather than treating knowledge production as a one-way extraction, I aimed for a more participatory approach, engaging those I interviewed in shaping my research. I shared drafts, sought feedback on quotes, and discussed my work's broader goals. These interactions, though occasionally misunderstood, deepened my understanding of the limits and potential of my positionality.

## Locating the field: an "enclave of non-belonging" in the heart of the capital city

To understand the bordering processes in Altındağ, it is important to briefly outline the district's social profile, shaped by migration and urban transformation. Altındağ spans 54 neighbourhoods and is home to nearly 400,000 people (Mercan, 2019). The district is vast and diverse, anchored by the historic Ulus area, which means "nation" in Turkish. This area, centred around the main square, also named Ulus, is home to the first national parliament, administrative buildings, and major historical monuments, stretching up to Ankara's iconic castle.

My fieldwork focused on the Altındağ hill gecekondu area (Bektaş & Yücel, 2013), located northeast of Ulus. This area includes neighbourhoods like Hıdırlıktepe, Atıfbey, İsmetpaşa, Kale Mahallesi, Hacı Bayram, Örnek, Çinçin, and Önder, where the first informal settlements (gecekondu) were built in the 1940s and 1950s.

The first inhabitants of Altındağ, mainly Kurds, Roma, Albanians, and Tatars from rural areas (Şenyapılı, 2004), contributed to the district's longstanding demographic diversity. Over the years, migrations, both internal until the 1990s and international afterward and especially in the past 20 years, have reinforced this heterogeneity. Most residents have worked in manual and often informal jobs, such as garbage collectors and street vendors, which shaped the district's identity as home to those on the margins of Turkey's capitalist development and national identity (Dölek, 2019). Despite significant urban, demographic, and social changes, the perception of Altındağ as the "other of the nation" (Dölek, 2019) persists.


Figure 1. Map of the Altındağ district in the historic centre of Ankara, illustrating the area's reconfigured image following urban transformation projects. The inscription in Turkish reads: "Altındağ: the heart of Ankara." Source: Author, November 2023.

Adopting Stravides' (2016) description of the city formed by enclaves, enclosed spaces produced by power in an ongoing attempt to recuperate surplus forms, I think it is possible to define metropolitan districts like Altındağ as "enclaves of non-belonging", places demarcated by a border in urban space that designates those who live there as who do not belong to the definition of formal citizens. This dynamic intensified with the acceleration of urban transformation under Erdogan's AKP in the 2000s, as exemplified by Altındağ. Laws enacted in 2004-2005 required municipalities with over 50,000 residents to implement urban regeneration plans while criminalising squatter settlements with penalties of up to five years in prison (Bektaş 2014). State-led projects by the Altındağ municipality and TOKI began in the

early 2000s, when both the district and Ankara's metropolitan administration were under AKP control, led by Mayor Melih Gökçek.


Figure 2. View of part of the İsmetpaşa neighbourhood in Altındağ where several informal settlements (gecekondu) are still present. Source: Author, October 2023.

According to statements by the former Altındağ municipal president in 2018, around 50,000 informal and precarious settlements have been demolished in Altındağ since 2005 (Özkan Gedikli, 2021). However, urban transformation projects have failed to improve living conditions for those who remained, especially in the hilly areas where most gecekondu were located. In parts untouched or left unfinished, structural fragilities persist, with vacant, poorly maintained flats and deteriorating public spaces. Moreover, the urban transformation's demographic shift has weakened the existing solidarity networks, particularly the intra-community ones, thereby intensifying the area's marginalisation. These projects also played a repressive role, directed mainly against left-wing organisations, already hard hit by the 1980 military coup, which were very active within informal neighbourhoods such as Altındağ, where they nurtured networks of popular self-organisation solidarity and mutual aid (Karakurt 2023).

In Altındağ, the state's "organised abandonment" (Harvey, 2006) prioritised real estate and financial rent, served to (re)build urban borders. In the interstices and abandoned areas of urban transformation, newcomer migrants have found refuge, particularly in recent years Syrians and Afghans, reinforcing the "otherness" imaginary linked to this metropolitan district. In this sense, I advance the idea that places like Altındağ become "enclaves of non-belonging," and the people who inhabit them are seen as "replaceable," "disposable" on the basis of characteristics that visibly mark them out as different (in terms of gender, class, skin color, etc.).

Gross-Wyrtzen (2020), in his analysis of the living conditions of sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, maintains that space reflects the material dimension of abandonment, as it separates abandoned people from citizens who adhere to the definition of "legitimate national identity" (Sayad, 1999), often forming what I attempt to term as "enclaves of non-belonging." The idea of being an enclave of non-belonging echoes in the words of inhabitants like M., an old resident of Altındağ, describing the area as "a place where it is easy to be invisible, and anyone who, for one reason or another, cannot or does not want to be seen, particularly by the public authorities, finds refuge here" (interview, October 2023).

Figure 3. View of the Kale neighbourhood in Altındağ, where urban transformation projects remain incomplete. Source: Author, October 2023.

Urban transformations have had a significant influence on spatial practices and the construction of a sense of community in areas historically inhabited by people from the same rural areas, which have been destroyed or abandoned over the years and which have often been re-inhabited by people from different regions and countries. These changes have

marked the collective imagination of the residents, bringing back memories of the creation of a community space. The deterioration of the collective, communal identity, which was once based on *hemşehrilik* (fellow citizenship)[1], is key to defining the current state of "enclaves of non-belonging". Urban transformation projects, as demonstrated by Karayiğit (2021) in Ankara's Demirlibahçe neighbourhood, significantly impact daily life, reshaping social dynamics and challenging cultural identities. These processes create a dual effect: migrants may find opportunities through economic participation and community involvement, while long-time residents often face exclusion and weakened community ties. In Demirlibahçe, for example, the arrival of Iraqi migrants has altered social interactions and spatial perceptions, highlighting the tensions urban transformation can provoke (Karayiğit, 2021). Similarly, urban projects in Altındağ remain incomplete, leaving many in uncertainty. In this liminal space of continual extraction and dispossession, people live in spaces marked by persistent precarity. However, this disposability is not only about destruction; it highlights the resistance of these spaces and the potential for new ways of living and learning. Lancione and Simone (2021) describe liminality as a flexible set of methods and strategies people use to navigate hardship, often unnoticed by broader society. It also holds political potential, offering opportunities for resistance and the creation of new forms of living and collective freedom.

In this sense, "Enclaves of non-belonging" are spaces of dispossession for those who don't align with national identity but also serve as a "thirdspace" (Soja, 1996), a hybrid, dynamic space where physical and mental, real and imagined, intersect, reflecting the complexity of lived experience. These spaces facilitate social practices and the negotiation of power, culture, and identity. Creating such spaces is a prolonged and contradictory process, particularly in today's authoritarian Turkey, where shared public spaces are increasingly constrained by repression and rising racism. In Altındağ, the current state of non-belonging reflects a tension between a crisis-ridden national identity and the emergence of a possible new, evolving one.

An Afghan woman, who has lived in the area since 2013 and who speaks and works in Turkish, exemplifies this:

> Before 2021, we used to spend our days at our Afghan neighbours' houses; we used to go shopping in the Afghan community's small reference shops; we used to eat together in Afghan restaurants; all this world in common ended when we decided not to submit to the rules of our community by not wanting to marry the men they had pointed out to us; since then, we have been alone, and, although it is a difficult condition, we try to conquer our life and our freedom. To this day, we cannot say that we feel part of either our community or Turkish society, as we do not have many ties and relationships with the people here, except for a few mothers of children who go to school with our children. We feel on our skin that racism is increasing every day. (Interview, December 2022)

[1] *Hemşehrilik* refers to a shared origin from the same city or village, fostering a sense of belonging among internal migrants who have moved to cities like Ankara since the 1940s. This notion forms the foundation of several civic associations in Turkey that strengthen community ties.

## Imaginary constructions of borders in the city and the Turkish context

Listening to these words and observing migrants' living conditions in Altındağ, I began to question not only the material effects of bordering practices, but also their imaginary construction and the deep roots in which they are embedded in Turkish history. Starting from an understanding of the border as an interplay of processes and practices of spatial differentiation (van Houtum, van Naerssen 2002), I contend that it is important to look over the imaginary dimension of border spatial construction, especially when we talk about urban borders. Paraphrasing Castoriadis (1975), the "imaginary institution" of the border provides order and meaning to both individual and societal existence through the collective creation of shared representations. To form a society, people must support elements of a common social imaginary, with borders playing a key role in fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. As Debarbieux (2015) I argue that to get it to work, a society needs spaces, places, and territories, conceiving space as both a social production and a factor in the construction of society. In this sense, we must take into consideration the social imaginary of space, in whose outlining borders are an important element because they form part of the background to our ways of conceiving and practicing space. The spatial and societal dimensions of borders allow us to read them not as fixed lines but as processes and practices that, as analysed by Rumford (2006), are fundamental to our understanding of the social. Bordering processes play a crucial role in the shaping of communities and the feeling of belonging to them, forming identities, and demarcating the differences between them. Following Van Houtoum et al. (2005), we can consider the concept of bordering as an interconnection between the process of ordering, from a social point of view, and of border-making, representing specific types of political projects of belonging (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018) that create a separation between those who are considered legitimate members of society and those who are outside the established parameters of collective identification. On this basis, the border is both the product and the producer of a social order (Raffestin 1986).

In this study, I analyse the specific social order of the explored context to better understand bordering processes and practices. I argue that the social order in Turkey and its capital, Ankara, is based on the adherence to the Turkish national identity, which emerged from the formation of the Turkish nation-state. With the Republic's founding in 1923, national homogeneity became central to Turkish identity, defined by Turkishness, a structured yet often unrecognised framework shaping how people perceive, sense, and understand (or overlook) their surroundings (Ünlü 2016, 398).

Barış Ünlü (2018) employs Whiteness Studies to examine the correlation between the past establishment and present operation of Turkishness. According to his argument, Turkishness is not defined by citizenship, cultural identity, or ideological affiliation. Instead, it encompasses a range of cognitive processes, emotions, behaviours, strategies, and physical expressions that go beyond social class, gender, or ideological affiliation. The origins of Turkish identity can be attributed to the Turkishness Contract (Ünlü 2018), an implicit agreement among the predominant Muslim population in Anatolia from 1912 to 1925. This contract, which serves as the fundamental framework of the Turkish Republic, has established standards and regulations for various domains and institutions since the 1920s. It has significantly influenced the mindset, emotions, and behaviour of persons who have been born, raised, socialised, and employed within these domains (Ünlü, 2018). The Turkishness

Contract serves as an interaction order that provides information and direction for daily interactions between those who are part of or outside the contract.

Ünlü utilises this frame, drawing on Pateman's (1988) and Mill's (1998) critiques of conventional social contract theories that tend to justify existing social hierarchies rather than address them. While Pateman focuses on the sexual contract and its implications for women's subordination, Mills examines the racial contract and its role in perpetuating racial injustices. In Paterman's case, gender is the focus, while in Mills' case, race, specifically Ünlü Turkishness, serves as the unmarked marker (Frankenburg 2001) of social and political order in Turkey.

In this sense, the process of bordering, which is based on the idea of Turkishness, is inscribed spatially within the urban context through the symbolic and architectural reproduction of the new republican national identity, as well as the exclusion and spatial segregation of those who did not adhere to its principles. Ankara serves as a prime example, serving as a model city for the entire nation. The establishment of a new capital in Ankara was believed to usher in a new political order (Kezer 2015). Beyond symbolism, the aspiration for modern Ankara aimed to embody and promote a worldview that aligned with the republic's ideals and a lifestyle that reflected these principles. In Turkey, echoing the work of Jongerden (2007, 2009) and Öktem (2009), the birth of the republic was accompanied by a material and discursive appropriation of space, built on the annihilation of the other in spatial representation through the tactic of renaming and reconstructing places, particularly in urban space. A great deal of engineering work, including social engineering (consider the population exchange with Greece and the internal migratory movements within the country), has accompanied the construction of a national identity, changing the face of cities and imprinting republican ideas on their appearance. Ankara's construction as a capital city is an important example of this. I concur with Low and Smith's (2005) claim that civic significance imbues public spaces, shaping citizens' imagery and thinking. Monuments, places of memory, and emblematic landscapes disseminate and shape the space of Ankara as a capital city, demonstrating how the recovery of a past history has been rewritten to conceive a common origin capable of becoming the foundation of new republican values and codes, which are also taught and transmitted through the urban form.

Nevertheless, the construction of the capital city was confronted with several contradictions, of which Altındağ represents one of the emblems, becoming from the heart of the nation in the 1930s to a district known for its informal self-built settlements, commonly called in Turkish as gecekondu (literally built overnight). The process of othering of the Altındağ district began in the 1940s and is marked by migration and informal settlements, which have been constant over the years, albeit in different forms: first people coming from rural areas, then especially from Kurdish regions where many villages were burned down following the outbreak of armed conflict between the state and the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s (Jongerden 2007), and finally international migration, which has seen a considerable increase in the last years, particularly linked to the Syrian and Afghan presence. In the last two decades of Erdogan's AKP government, we have witnessed new practices, policies, and narratives that have had an important impact on bordering processes.

## The differential inclusion policy in urban spaces in Turkey

When, together with L., a human rights activist who has long been active in networks of solidarity and popular self-organisation in various informal neighbourhoods of the Turkish

capital, we reached the most marginalised areas of Altındağ from the center of Ankara, as soon as we crossed "the border" and entered the rough streets of this piece of the "other" city, he often reminded me that "this is the final stop of the nation, the place where the others, the excluded, those on the outside, live" (interview, October 2023). An important part of these "others" today are international migrants, most of them Syrians and Afghans. In recent years, International migrants, mainly Syrians and Afghans, have come to form a significant part of Altındağ's population. "According to association studies, 55% of registered Syrians in Ankara live in Altındağ, where Syrians and Afghans constitute about 15% of the district's 360,000 residents" (T24, 2021). Understanding their living conditions requires examining Turkey's system of "differential inclusion" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), legally constructed and socially enacted, especially in urban areas. Since Turkey maintains the geographical limitations of the 1951 Geneva Convention, it does not grant refugee status to non-Europeans, making most asylum seekers' presence temporary, pending resettlement or repatriation. EU-Turkey relations have significantly influenced migration policies, particularly since accession negotiations began in 2005. The 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP, No. 6458) and the 2014 establishment of the Directorate-General for Migration Management (DGMM) marked major legal shifts. Notably, Article 91 of the LFIP introduced temporary protection status for Syrians, a first in Turkish migration law[2]. However, before the temporary protection regulation in October 2014, Syrian migrants lacked a clear legal framework. It stipulates that Syrians under temporary protection must reside in the provinces where they have applied to access their rights, underscoring the significance of the spatial dimension in Turkey's migration governance. The special status reserved for Syrians, with its conditionalities, highlights a system of differential inclusion in the country's migration management. A complex system of differences based on ethnic and religious origin and social class background was the basis on which the legislative framework was built. This special status, with its conditionalities, reflects a system of "differential inclusion" shaped by ethnicity, religion, and social class. Framed as transitory residents and guests, international migrants face precarious inclusion, complicating urban cohabitation amid weak inclusion policies.

Initially, the government promoted coexistence in urban spaces, framing Syrian Sunni Muslims as guests and invoking Anatolian hospitality. Erdoğan often likened their reception to Medina's welcome of Meccan migrants during the Hijra, reinforcing an Islamic cultural narrative of solidarity.

If the idea of Turkishness, as well as that of bordering, are operational concepts that can take different forms and practices over time, we can read Erdoğan's exaltation of the feeling of religious belonging to the Sunni umma in his rhetoric to explain his policies of welcoming Syrian migrants as a strengthening of the role of islam within Turkish national identity and in the processes of reconsolidation of who are "us" and "others". While the rhetoric of guesthood for Syrians has persisted over time, it has undergone adjustments based on both internal and external political interests (Abdelaaty 2021). However, it is crucial

[2] According to Article 91, temporary protection can be granted to foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, who cannot return to it and who have come to Turkey in a situation of mass influx in search of immediate protection.

to recognize a notable shift from the "open door" policy to the dilution plan, which has a distinct temporal dimension and began to evolve in 2016.

I believe that certain events had an important influence on this change, starting with the statement with the EU on March 18, 2016, which, in an attempt to stop departures to Europe, has contributed to making the stay of international migrants in Turkey, not only Syrians, permanent, undermining the government's rhetoric of guesthood. According to Article 1 of the Statement, Turkey undertakes to accept the repatriation of all migrants in need of international protection who entered Greece after March 20, 2016, and to take back all "irregular" migrants intercepted in Turkish waters. The declaration also introduced the "one-to-one" mechanism, which stipulates that for each Syrian returning to Turkey from the Greek islands, the EU will resettle another Syrian, up to a maximum of 72,000 people (Art. 2).[3]. The declaration also mentions strengthening the customs union and the accession process so that Turkey can obtain full membership, with the promise of a coveted visa-free regime. Additionally, the outsourcing framework has strengthened existing incentives, including support for capacity building and financial aid, on more generous terms, to address Turkey's reception and inclusion of established refugees on its territory (Gökalp 2019).

This statement has clearly marked political narratives and practices in Turkey, with the migration issue becoming increasingly present in the public debate. Içduygu et al. (2017) postulate that one of the first and most important effects is that the government's rhetoric has changed from one of compassion based on religious and cultural similarities to one of favoring skilled and educated Syrians as people to welcome. This is in line with the widespread rhetoric in Europe about differentiating people who deserve to be included in society from those who do not, usually based on class, nationality, and culture. The issue of the repatriation of Syrians in particular has not become a domain only of the main oppositions (with the exception of the pro-Kurdish left led by the HDP, currently called the DEM party), but has been agitated by the government, even for its geopolitical interests in north-east Syria in an anti-Kurdish function, with the attempt to repatriate one million Syrians within the Turkish-occupied areas in the region.

## The lynching against migrants of 11 August 2021 and the dilution plan: bordering processes and practices in Turkey

In this context, a growing climate of hostility towards migrants has shaped not only the narrative and government policies, but also the everyday lives of migrants. As pointed out by F., an Afghan woman living in Altındağ:

> When I arrived in 2016, people showed solidarity, but everything changed after a year. The same people who were friendly to me and my family at the beginning then started to treat us badly. Neighbours use to throw things on our balconies, at school our children are insulted and marginalised by their classmates because they do not know the Turkish language well. (Interview, November 2023)

The implementation of the EU statement and other events that intensified the authoritarian turn, exacerbated repression, and undermined social coexistence have significantly

[3] www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/ eu-turkey-statement/

accelerated discontent towards migrants in recent years. These include, among others: the failed coup d'état of July 15, 2016 and the subsequently declared two-year state of emergency; the presidentialist constitutional referendum of April 16, 2017, which increased the role and power of the president of the republic; the various military campaigns in the Kurdish-led north-eastern Syria and the intensification of repression against Kurdish organisations also within the country; the growing economic crisis; and the recent devastating earthquake in the south-east, where, among other things, there was a considerable migrant population, especially in the border areas with Syria.

The popular resentment against migrants in the country, at the same time the product and producer of the public debate on this issue, saw one of its most striking moments in the lynching of Altındağ in August 2021, an event that has become central to the practices and processes of bordering in Turkey.

Starting with an analysis of the events of September 6–7, 1955, namely the lynching of the greek orthodox community in Istanbul[4], Tanıl Bora (2004) stated that throughout Turkish history, lynching has been used as a governing technique and a means to mold public opinion. This approach provides us with a key to reading and understanding the events of August 11, 2021, that links the discursive dimension with practical and legislative outcomes to analyze lynching as an important bordering practice in Turkey. Indeed, the Altındağ lynching marked a new direction in the government's migration policies with the issuing of the so-called "dilution plan" which establishes a maximum threshold of 20% of foreign residents in the neighborhoods of metropolitan areas like Ankara and in 63 other provinces with a strong migrant presence (PMM, 2023).

> After the racist attacks, according to official data, 4,514 refugees from different areas of Altındağ were displaced as part of the plan. Over the past two years, 1,500 shacks housing refugees have been demolished and a demolition order has been issued for 357 houses (Etelegraf, 2022).

The dilution plan was followed by an increase in police checks and raids on homes. In Altındağ there has been significant growth of people arrested and sent to detention centres for repatriation, which has generated fear of frequenting public spaces, particularly for undocumented migrants. As stated by O., an anti-racist activist working in a NGO with a socio-legal assistance desk in Altındağ

> The social life of migrants has been severely restricted and their businesses are closed. State welfare benefits have been cut. Documents are not renewed and, in many cases, they are cancelled. This makes it difficult for them to access basic rights, such as health services and education (interview, December 2022).

In addition to elements that link it to a tradition of othering and exclusion of minorities that has used lynching as a governmental practice in Turkey, I propose analysing the dilution plan

[4] The government, using allied press, spread rumours of a bomb attack on Atatürk's birthplace in Thessaloniki, triggering a two-day "Greek hunt." Dozens were killed, Greek-owned businesses destroyed, and Orthodox churches vandalised, with violence extending to other non-Muslim minorities. In short, the government stirred up a veritable popular uprising that targeted anyone who was not considered Turkish and Muslim, mainly targeting the Greek Orthodox community, causing a large part of it to flee the country. See Sarıoğlu, Irini. 2024. *The Anti-Greek Riots of Istanbul in 1955*. Istanbul:Libra Kitap.

as an additional step towards harmonising Turkish migration practices, policies, and narratives with those of Europe. The quota system envisaged by the statement (which, among other things, traces a historical precedent of population exchange between Turkey and Greece that marked the birth of the Turkish Republic) encouraged differential inclusion processes based on a system of rewarding skills and national, cultural, and religious affiliations. The rhetoric of impossible coexistence and feared clashes of civilisations, especially in neighbourhoods with a significant migrant presence, which underpinned the logic of the dilution plan, traced a similar canvas used in the European public debate on welcoming migrants. Beyond governmental practices, certain paradigms of anti-migrant discourse, fuelled by European right-wingers, have significantly entered the Turkish public debate. Only a few days after Altindağ's lynching, the Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi*) emerged, elevating anti-migrant rhetoric to the forefront of its political agenda. It pursued conspiracy and racist theories of a concealed ethnic replacement plan, prompting authors like Koca and Saç (2023) to associate it with the European far right, particularly drawing comparisons to Zemmour's ascent in France.


Figure 4. Election poster of Ümit Özdağ, leader of the far-right Zafer Partisi (Victory Party), in Ankara, stating: "When 13 million asylum seekers leave the country, this bag will be filled more cheaply. The Victory Party will come (to power), 13 million asylum seekers will go." Source: Author, December 2022.


Figure 5. Election poster in Istanbul of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, main opponent of Erdoğan in the May 2023 presidential elections and candidate of the CHP (Republican People's Party), stating: "We will withdraw from the agreements on asylum seekers made with the European Union. In two years, we will say goodbye to asylum seekers. We will regain control of our borders." Source: Author, November 2022.

But while the lynching of Altındağ has contributed to a tightening of migration legislation and increased racist rhetoric and practices, it has also stimulated a reaction from the anti-racist associative and political scene. Immediately, anti-racist political, social and civic organisations took a stand and demonstrated in major cities across the country, denouncing the incident and showing solidarity with migrants (Evrensel 2021). This was followed by moments of meeting and debate, animated by solidarity platforms that have emerged in recent years such as *Hepimiz Göçmeniz: Irkçılığa Hayır!* (We are all migrants, no to racism) and *Birlikte Yaşamak İstiyoruz İnisiyatifi* (We Want to Live Together Initiative), in which activists and collectives within migrant communities also take part, such as *Sığınmacılar Hakları Platformu (*Asylum Seekers Rights Platform), founded by Syrian activist Taha Elgazi.

I also found the centrality of the Altındağ lynching at the national level for the growth of solidarity practices and resistance from below in the discourses of collectives and activists who do not live in Ankara, but are active in other cities, especially Istanbul, as confirmed by A., a militant from *Mayıs'ta Yaşam Kooperatifi* (Cooperative for Life in May):

> We come from a working-class neighbourhood in Istanbul, called 1 May, historically made up of informal settlements and with a strong Alevi and Kurdish left-wing identity. We always did teaching and after-school activities for children and young people in need, along with other cultural initiatives related to popular art and music. After the Altındağ lynching, we felt the exigency to engage in solidarity with migrants, trying to bring together our social struggles with locals and migrants for better living conditions. So we started after-school and teaching activities, bringing our radical pedagogical practice and experience to the neighbourhoods where most migrants live in Istanbul, even if they are miles away from our neighbourhood. (Interview, December 2023)

Indeed, the lynching of Altındağ and the subsequent "dilution plan" of the government have highlighted the importance of coexistence and daily life within neighbourhoods. In response to bordering and othering policies, not only experiences of solidarity, animated by political associations and/or organisations, have arisen but also in everyday living migrant inhabitants put into practice "tactics" (de Certeau 1990) of ordinary resistance (Scott 2009, Bayat 2013). In the authoritarian context of today's Turkey, where repression discourages collective activation, such tactics reside in ordinary everyday practices that defy, in a discreet way, prohibitions and the exclusionary legislative apparatus. For example, to avoid police checks, especially undocumented migrants organise alternative transport systems when moving from one territory to another; they create public spaces in private settings; they choose certain hours to go out; they pay attention to clothing; and they are often accompanied by children. Practices that, when they come together with solidarity realities, can generate collective moments capable of creating a common space that goes beyond closed enclaves, as in experiences like *Mayıs'ta Yaşam Kooperatifi* (Cooperative for Life in May).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate two fundamental aspects of bordering processes and practices in Turkey that link internal and external dimensions of migration and identity policies in the country.

Processes of bordering and othering, rooted in the concept of Turkishness, have manifested in various ways. For instance, during the years of Erdogan's rule, certain aspects of Turkish identity, such as the Sunni Muslim religious identity, have gained prominence at the expense of others.

In my study, I focused on how this national identity construction and bordering processes are inscribed in space, where the urban transformation projects of the last twenty years in particular have exacerbated the marginalisation of entire areas, such as the one in the Altındağ district in Ankara, where certain governmental practices, like the "dilution plan" after the lynching on August 11, 2021, have marked the lives of its inhabitants as well as discursive and political actions at not only a local but a national level.

In this scenario, European externalisation policies, culminating in the Statement of March 18, 2016, have exerted influence in various ways. These include altering the collective perception of migrants as a security threat, bolstering the government's international standing, intensifying an authoritarian trend in the country, and exacerbating the rise of racism in the public discourse on the migrant issue. Discourses on the benefits and merits of welcoming only certain types of migrants, the challenges of multicultural coexistence within urban spaces, and the mechanisms of rejection and expulsion have fueled the expansion of a racist anti-migrant imaginary, similar to the extreme right's propagation in Europe (refer to the discourse on ethnic substitution mentioned earlier), starting in 2016.

At the same time, based on my ethnographic fieldwork in the Altındağ district in Ankara, in this article I affirmed how, to fully comprehend the processes and practices of bordering in Turkey, it is crucial to remember that migrants and locals are not only objects who endure these practices but also subjects capable of contesting them. Not only do their associations and political organisations openly oppose them; their ordinary, hidden tactics of everyday resistance reveal their agency.

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