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COMMENTARY

# How Turkey has governed Syrian refugees over a decade: a three-tiered class analysis

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From the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011 to the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, Turkey accommodated over three million Syrian refugees, becoming host to one of the world's largest refugee populations in the world. As of May 2025, official records indicate that approximately 2,744,000 Syrian refugees remain under temporary protection in Turkey, having dropped below the three-million mark in late 2024. The future of these refugees remains uncertain amid the rapidly changing and unstable conditions in war-torn Syria.

In this unprecedented situation, the Turkish government typically received generous compliments from the international community, with commendations such as "an extraordinary generosity," "an impressive job," and "an exceptional solidarity." Given that the entire European Union (EU) accommodated only a third of the refugees that Turkey sheltered before the Ukrainian war – and even this relatively modest number sparked passionate debate in all EU member nations – Turkey's situation was truly "unique" and exceptional. This picture raises the following thorny question: How did Turkey manage to maintain such an exceptional status for over ten years without a major setback? How did a country like Turkey, with relatively limited economic resources and a comparatively weak legal, political, and administrative infrastructure for integration (Akar and Erdoğdu 2019), absorb and govern such a massive number of refugees?

This article develops a three-tiered class analysis to address these questions. First, at the "formation" level, it explores how Syrian refugees transitioned into a surplus population, compelled to sell their labor power in Turkey. Next, at the "production" level, it examines workplace dynamics and the specific power relations between Turkish business owners and Syrian refugee workers. Lastly, at the "reproduction" level, it analyzes urban social processes to reveal the actors and mechanisms involved in the ideological and coercive perpetuation of these power relations.

An analysis across these three levels elucidates that the incorporation of over three million Syrian refugees into Turkey over the past decade was not underpinned by a systematically crafted or officially coordinated migration management strategy. Instead, it unfolded in a largely improvised and reactive manner, shaped

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predominantly by the integration of Syrian refugees into the Turkish labor market. This inquiry further reveals that the socio-economic positioning and lived realities of Syrian refugees in Turkey were orchestrated by a constellation of actors, both formal and informal, operating across multiple scales. These range from international entities, such as the EU, to domestic stakeholders, including business owners and everyday Turkish citizens. Their effects extend to the micro-level power relations within local neighborhoods. The "absorption" of Syrian refugees in Turkey thus emerged as a product of the interplay between diverse actors and multifaceted mechanisms operating at intersecting levels. This intricate assemblage gave rise to a distinct labor regime that integrated Syrian refugees in precarious ways and enabled Turkish business owners to pursue their accumulation strategies more effectively.

In this context, the incorporation of Syrian refugees into Turkish society can be aptly described as a process of "governing" in the Foucauldian sense. For Foucault,

> governing did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered or calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others (Foucault 1982, 790).

Foucauldian-inspired studies vary significantly in content, approach, and interpretations of governing. As Walters and Tazzioli (2023, 5–6) argue, there is no singular, coherent understanding of governmentality, and the way it is conceptualized significantly influences what is included within the scope of "governing." Nevertheless, the mechanisms of power relations encapsulated within the notion of governing resonate strongly with the ways in which the Syrian population's "possible field of action" is structured in Turkey. This perspective highlights the "different forms and techniques of rule" (Lippert 1999, 296) that extend beyond the official institutions and regulations of the state (Gordon 1991, 36).

Rather than limiting itself to state apparatuses, the notion of governing underscores the involvement of "diverse forces and groups that, in heterogeneous ways, seek to regulate the lives of individuals and the conditions within particular national territories in pursuit of various goals" (Miller and Rose 1990, 3). While Foucault acknowledges that power relations have increasingly been "rationalized and institutionalized" within state institutions, resulting in the state's appropriation of various forms of power, he cautions against reducing governance to the state alone. Instead, he advocates for a broader perspective that recognizes the multiplicity and relative autonomy of the actors, contexts, and mechanisms of "government," which often operate at a certain formal distance from the state's official domain (Foucault 1982, 793). This perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of how governing of Syrian refugees operates through a constellation of forces that extend well beyond the visible boundaries of state power.

While we borrow the notion of "governing" from Foucault's conceptual framework to investigate how the living conditions of Syrians in Turkey are structured, this does

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not imply that our analysis remains confined within the epistemological paradigm he developed to understand modern societies. Instead, our approach is grounded in a historical materialist epistemology, which identifies the relations of class domination as the "*point de capiton*" where diverse forms of power and techniques of government intersect and coalesce. In this regard, we move beyond merely asserting that the techniques of government applied to Syrians produce them as classified, subordinated, and hierarchized subjects. Our analysis aims to uncover how the multifaceted instruments of governing Syrians and the actions of the actors involved operate within a broader context shaped by the imperatives of capitalism in Turkey. These mechanisms, far from acting in isolation, work collectively to reinforce and reproduce the structures of class domination that underpin Turkish society.

While there exists a substantial body of research on the working and living conditions of Syrians in Turkey, including studies on integration, labor market participation, and everyday experiences, our aim in this article is to offer an overarching analytical framework that brings these fragmented insights into a coherent, class-based perspective. Our three-tiered class analysis, through which we examine how the Syrian population has been "governed" in Turkey, is designed to provide such a comprehensive framework – one that unites the various dimensions of the Syrian refugee experience into a holistic perspective. As a methodological contribution, we propose that a class-based perspective serves as a fruitful epistemological approach for connecting these dispersed elements, revealing the interconnected dynamics that shape the realities of Syrian refugees in Turkey. In developing this framework, we draw upon multiple sources, including insights from our fieldwork conducted in İzmir[1] between 2017 and 2021. While we have previously analyzed this fieldwork in detail[2] (Bélanger and Saracoglu 2020; Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019a; Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2021), here we revisit key findings to support the three-tiered class framework proposed in this article. We also seek to substantiate our analysis further by engaging with more recent studies on Syrian refugees in Turkey. Together, these resources enable us to construct an empirically grounded and theoretically integrated perspective on the governance of Syrian refugees.

## Syrian refugees as subjects to "governing"

Despite the diverse demographics of Syrian refugees in Turkey – varying in age, gender, ethnicity, place of origin, and education – the majority share a common experience: living in cities across Turkey and earning a livelihood by selling their labor power informally in various sectors of the Turkish economy.

[1] As of May 2025, over 109,000 registered Syrians live in İzmir according to the official data. They are dispersed across different neighborhoods, and find employment predominantly as informal workers in the textile, footwear, agriculture, and food service industries.

[2] Between 2018 and 2021, our fieldwork in İzmir included ten visits across four districts (Basmane, Konak; Torbalı; Bornova; and Limontepe, Karabağlar), where low-income Turkish citizens and Syrians share workplaces, residential areas, and public spaces. We conducted 110 interviews, thirty-two of which were with Syrian laborers working informally to support their families. Other participants included municipal officials, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, and local workers sharing these spaces.

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According to one of the most comprehensive reports published by Luis Pinedo Caro for the International Labor Organization, 940,000 Syrians worked in Turkey in 2017, with 92 percent of them working informally (Caro 2020, 63). They are estimated to constitute nearly 10 percent of the informally employed population in Turkey as a whole (Erdal 2019). Given that just 11.2 percent of Syrian women work, according to the same survey, the vast majority of the Syrian refugee population relies on wages gained through informal employment. It is true that many Syrians are also self-employed and small business owners (Akçalı and Görmüş 2021; Badalič 2023, 969). By 2018, those Syrians who had the chance to bring financial capital from their home country either informally or formally were estimated to own around 10,000 companies in Turkey employing about 44,000 other Syrians (Güven et al. 2018, 16). However, this figure concerns a very small proportion of the Syrians and is dwarfed in comparison to the wage laborers. The great majority of the Syrian community has been incorporated into Turkish society as urban working-class families. A recent study in urban neighborhoods with high concentrations of Syrian refugees supports this, showing that 88.8 percent of them rely primarily on paid employment for their subsistence (Yükseker et al. 2023, 53). According to Caro's estimates, more than 70 percent of them work in unskilled trade, construction, and manufacturing jobs (Caro 2020, 63).

Nearly one-third of the Syrian workforce is employed in the textile, garment, leather, and footwear industries, which are always in need of cheap workers due to high competition in the worldwide market (Yılmaz 2020). Hospitality, cleaning, and care are some other sectors in the cities that also absorb a significant number of Syrian women as informal workers (Canefe 2018, 41). Caro's research also demonstrates that the majority of Syrians working in these industries are paid wages that are far less than the legal minimum wage and below the hunger threshold. Their working hours are likewise quite long; almost all of them work more than fifty hours per week on average (Caro 2020, 59). They are typically employed in sectors and under conditions that native Turkish citizens tend to avoid – such as physically demanding, low-paid, and insecure jobs – or they are preferred over native workers because their labor is significantly cheaper for employers.

Such special conditions of exploitation in the workplace mirror the Syrians' urban existence. The average household income of Syrian families is either below or at the minimum wage level and is almost half that of Turkish families living in similar neighborhoods (Yükseker et al. 2023, 62). Syrian refugee laborers rent substandard homes in different parts of the city, often living in overcrowded conditions with their families or with several other families (Acara and Özdemir 2023, 1899; Sengul 2022). In line with the framework built by Ritchie et al. we understand Syrian refugees "as not just bodies on the move, but laboring bodies, producing and reproducing the labor power necessary to move capital through processes of circulation, valorization, and accumulation" (Ritchie et al. 2022, 9).

It is crucial to recognize that Syrians are not the sole migrant group subjected to unique modalities of exploitation within Turkey's labor processes. Afghans, for example, constituting the second-largest refugee community in the country, are estimated to number up to one million. Of these, approximately 170,000 have been granted international protection, while the remainder exist as "irregular migrants," bereft of any formal legal status (Karadağ and Sert 2023, 450). Like Syrians, Afghans

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are heavily concentrated in the informal labor market, occupying roles in labor-intensive sectors. Yet, as Karadağ and Sert (2023) demonstrate in their article based on a comprehensive fieldowork in İstanbul their overwhelmingly irregularized status and heightened susceptibility to deportation exacerbate their precarity, leaving them particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers.

The three-tiered framework of class analysis – comprising the levels of formation, production, and reproduction – proposed in this article also applies to other vulnerable migrant groups, such as Afghan refugees, with important nuances due to their predominantly irregular status. The focus on Syrians is not based on the assumption of their uniquely exceptional position in Turkey's labor market. Instead, it is driven by the analytical depth provided by examining their decade-long integration into the Turkish labor market, which highlights the mechanisms and actors governing migrants with precarious status, particularly through their absorption into informal labor.

## The level of formation: the making of Syrian refugees as "informal laborers"

The level of formation refers to the analysis of the processes by which Syrians formed within the borders of Turkey as a large population that could survive only by selling their labor to Turkish capital-owners informally. The way the Syrians are governed today is directly related to the circumstances under which the Syrian workers as a subset of the Turkish working class were born. Five interrelated factors worked together to turn Syrian refugees into an informal working population. The first is their dispossession due to the war in Syria. As Hanieh states, "through the very dispossession that generates movements of people across (and within) borders, migration comes to powerfully shape processes of class formation in specific national contexts" (Hanieh 2022, 37). The Syrian civil war, of which the Turkish state was an active part alongside other international powers, instigated the process of dispossession on the part of the Syrians and played a constitutive role in their formation as a part of the working class in Turkey (Droz-Vincent 2020). In the face of violence which many of them directly experienced, they lost more than just their homes and livelihoods when they left their country; they also lost their legal status as citizens of a sovereign state, their social networks, and cultural capital that was valuable in Syria but not necessarily in Turkey (Bélanger et al. 2021; Demirci and Kırdar 2023, 17–18; Pelek 2019, 620). The words of a 26-year-old Syrian man, who had been studying law before the war, reveal the deep sense of loss experienced by many refugees in Turkey – stripped of their skills, credentials, and cultural capital, unable to build on what they once had, and left with little choice but to sell their labor informally:

> I was in law school, but I didn't finish my degree ... because of the crisis; after what happened we just packed up and left to come here in Turkey. I don't have any skills; I can't be a carpenter, or a smith. Some people told me about courses regarding sewing and tailoring, and I applied for a round of courses which last for a month and a half ... We took the course for a month and a half, but it was pointless; they told me that I wasn't good at it, and that I'm too slow. In order to really become skillful, you need more courses, but I couldn't, so I

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> continued searching for freelance work. This was a while ago, until I found the lightbulb company . . .[3]

Consequently, the vast majority of Syrians who fled to Turkey lacked the means to sustain themselves and were therefore forced to sell their labor power to Turkish business owners without the ability to negotiate. Therefore, the Syrian working population in Turkey includes not only unskilled laborers, but also educated and qualified individuals from Syria (Caro 2020, 66).

A second factor in establishing Syrian refugees as informal workers in Turkey was the extended duration of their stay, driven by political circumstances rather than personal choice. Initially, the Turkish state, supporting the Syrian opposition, expected the Assad regime to fall and refugees to return quickly. However, as the war persisted and intensified, these expectations were dashed, and the refugee population in Turkey grew. This situation was further entrenched by the EU's externalization strategy, which became prominent after 2015. The 2016 EU–Turkey refugee deal, a hallmark of this strategy, required Turkey to restrict refugee flows to the EU in exchange for €6 billion for refugee governance (Muftuler-Bac 2022, 304–305; Yükseker and Çeler 2024). This deal effectively trapped Syrian refugees in Turkey, leaving them no choice but to seek informal work for survival.

As the third factor, the inability to house the growing Syrian refugee population in camps long term led to a policy allowing them to reside in various provinces across Turkey. Before 2017, a period of spontaneous refugee movement emerged, during which registration and regulatory measures lagged behind refugee actions (İçduygu and Osserian 2024, 171). This shift resulted in a predominantly urban refugee presence, with the number of camp residents dropping from 280,000 in 2015 to 59,000 in 2024. Refugees became a "free labor force," seeking work in cities with large populations, higher incomes, and significant refugee communities (Bertoli et al. 2021, 3). From 2017 onward, rising anti-migrant sentiment and tensions between Syrians and Turkish citizens prompted the state to implement measures restricting refugee mobility and confining them to designated areas. However, many refugees circumvented these restrictions by registering in provinces near metropolitan areas or settling there without official registration (İçduygu and Osserian 2024, 173). As a result, İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir now host over 20 percent of the Syrian population, while border cities like Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Hatay accommodate most of the remainder.

"What allows migrant workers to be used as a 'cheap' and largely unprotected labor power are not any inherent qualities of the people so categorized but, rather, state regulations that render them powerless" (Sharma 2000, 8). This universal pattern applies to the Syrian refugee workers as well. The fourth factor, hence, underscores the intervention and orchestration by the state in the process of transforming Syrian refugees into informal laborers. In 2014, the Turkish government implemented the temporary protection regulation to delineate the basic rights of Syrians within Turkey. Operating under this framework, Syrians neither obtained the status of refugees nor citizens ensuring permanent residency in Turkey; instead, they held a precarious status affording them fundamental rights such as access to

[3] Authors' fieldwork in İzmir (see notes 1 and 2).

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healthcare and education – essential components for sustaining Syrian labor power. Until 2016, Syrians were barred from obtaining work permits, compelling them to seek informal employment across various sectors. The employment policy introduced in 2016 mandated employers to seek work permits for any Syrian employee, demonstrate the unavailability of Turkish nationals for the position, and limit the Syrian workforce quota to no more than 10 percent per workplace. Additionally, Syrians were restricted to pursuing formal employment solely within the provinces of their registration.

This regulatory framework proved impractical and ineffective against the backdrop of Turkey's structural labor market conditions: formal job opportunities were scarce, while the influx of Syrian refugees was unprecedented. Another complicating factor emerged in 2016: Syrian refugees became recipients of the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) program, supported by the EU, providing monthly cash assistance to over 1.5 million refugee families. However, formal employment rendered households ineligible for ESSN benefits. Faced with bureaucratic barriers to formal employment, lack of employer incentives to procure work permits (Sengul 2022, 287), and concerns about losing ESSN support, Syrian refugees were compelled to engage in informal labor arrangements for meager wages and under precarious conditions (Danış 2016; Lordoğlu and Aslan 2016; Mutlu et al. 2018). Unlike situations observed in the Global North, the formation of Syrian refugees into displaced workers in Turkey occurred rapidly. This phenomenon, as noted by Demirci and Kirdar (2022, 3), was attributed to the abundance of informal-sector jobs requiring minimal training or host country-specific human capital. Thus, the combination of Syrians' precarious socio-legal status and state-imposed restrictions on formal employment under the temporary protection regime (Ilcan et al. 2018, 55) constituted the catalyst for the swift transformation of Syrians into informal laborers.

In addition to the four identified factors, a fifth crucial element influencing the labor dynamics was the state's *ad hoc* leniency towards informal employment of Syrian refugees (Pelek 2019, 617; Sengul 2022, 289). The official authorities maintained a policy of "deliberate ignorance" regarding the informal employment of workers, with Turkish authorities infrequently carrying out workplace inspections (Danış and Nazlı 2019, 151). This lax enforcement meant that employers were aware they faced minimal risk when hiring Syrians without work permits. As a result, the influx of Syrian refugees into the labor market has catalyzed a significant shift, amplifying pre-existing patterns of labor law evasion, rendering them more pervasive and entrenched than ever before (Şenses 2016). These five interrelated processes highlight the critical role of Turkish state policies in shaping Syrian refugees into informal wage laborers. Rather than being passive to external interventions, the Turkish state has actively facilitated conditions that transform refugees into a vital labor force. Equally significant is the EU's migration control and externalization strategy, which extends its regulatory influence beyond its borders. However, attributing sole agency to state and supranational entities oversimplifies the dynamics of refugee governance. A closer look at the dimensions of production and reproduction reveals that governance operates beyond formal legal and institutional frameworks, involving a complex interplay of social forces, non-state actors, and broader societal power dynamics.

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## The level of production: Syrian refugees in relations of exploitation

After explaining how Syrian refugees came to be positioned as a population compelled to sell their labor to survive in Turkish cities, we now look at the level of production to examine the nature of work relations of which they are part and the actors and mechanisms involved in governing them. In reality, it is possible to comprehend the specific working conditions of Syrian refugees if we dissect the reasons why Turkish business owners hire a Syrian refugee as a wage worker rather than a Turkish worker. This inquiry is particularly significant for Turkey, given its already low wage levels, relatively high and volatile unemployment rates, and pervasive informal employment practices. At this juncture, it is important to clarify some common characteristics of the businesses employing Syrian refugees.

These businesses, particularly in highly informal sectors such as textiles, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture, vary widely in terms of size and capital. While smaller enterprises typically rely on informal labor to reduce costs and remain viable, larger companies with over twenty employees – where 32 percent of Syrians work – also exploit this workforce to maintain profitability under competitive pressures. Unlike typical informal employment patterns found in smaller businesses with fewer than ten employees, where concealment is easier, a significant share of Syrians work in more visible, larger firms, which is uncommon in informal employment globally (Caro 2020, 64–68). This reliance on cheap, flexible labor allows these businesses to survive in sectors known for their low productivity and narrow profit margins, while the agriculture sector follows similar patterns of informal, low-wage employment due to its seasonal and labor-intensive nature (Dedeoğlu 2024). Ultimately, the employers of the refugees focus on maximizing short-term gains and maintaining competitive edges by systematically cutting labor costs and circumventing formal regulations, perpetuating informal employment.

Unlike in advanced capitalist and oil-rich countries, where low-wage labor is often scarce among native populations, Turkey has a relatively large supply of such labor – not only due to lower levels of education and ongoing rural-to-urban migration, but also because of structurally suppressed wages, weak labor protections, and limited union power. Hence, the employment of Syrian refugees must offer extra discernible advantages to business owners. Extensive research on the working conditions of Syrian refugees sheds light on these benefits, which range from their willingness to accept lower wages and longer hours compared to Turkish citizen workers, to their readiness to undertake physically demanding, unhealthy, and precarious jobs that Turkish citizens tend to avoid (Akbaş and Ulutaş 2018; Badalič 2023; Siviş 2021; Tanrıkulu 2021). In our previous work, we have argued that the presence of Syrian refugees functions as a "spatial fix" for the capital-owners in Turkey (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019a). Through the concept of spatial fix that could be used to explain the specific conditions that the Syrians face at the level of production relations, we can also decipher some other "implict" mechanisms and actors involved in the governing of Syrian refugees.

The concept of "spatial fix," originally coined by David Harvey (1981), refers to the inherent inclination of capitalists to produce and reconfigure space to generate, secure, and realize surplus value, as well as to counteract or mitigate crisis tendencies. The spatial fix could be achieved typically by the movement of capital in space

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through the geographical expansion of markets and reproduction (Harvey 2002). Yet, there is another not adequately elaborated aspect of spatial fix in Harvey's work (Scott 2013, 1091) referring to the spatial expansion of the exploitable surplus population at home via "labor surpluses imported from abroad" (Harvey 2002, 304–305). Adam Hanieh applied this second aspect of the spatial fix to the realm of international labor migration in his 2010 work (Hanieh 2010), aiming to comprehend class formation and the dynamics of temporary migrant labor flows within the Gulf Cooperation Council states. By treating foreign migrant workers as non-nationals, capital transcends the confines of national space for exploitation and accumulation. Thus, spatial fix operates within the framework of international migration dynamics.

In Turkey, a parallel spatial fix is evident in the integration of Syrians into specific sectors of the economy as an informal labor force. The employment of Syrian refugees represents a spatial fix for Turkish capital, effectively circumventing domestic legal and social constraints to profit maximization.[4] Indeed, Turkish capitalism has consistently possessed an abundant reserve army of labor and informal workers within its borders, adeptly servicing its labor-intensive sectors. The informalization of the workforce, allowing unrestrained flexibility in employing various methods to increase exploitation and control over workers beyond legal boundaries, became particularly significant after the 1980s. This trend intensified with the integration of Turkey's labor-intensive sectors into the global market, where competitiveness largely relied on the utilization of cheap labor.

The demand for low-cost and informal labor in industries like construction, textiles, and agriculture had been met through the migration of rural workers from inner Anatolia to capital-rich urban centers. Moreover, the forced displacement of Kurds throughout the 1990s, stemming from heightened conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Turkish state forces, significantly bolstered this labor pool (Yılmaz 2008). Despite confronting dire conditions upon arrival, these migrant workers, endowed with citizenship status, progressively augmented their ability to cultivate solidarity networks among themselves (Çınar 2018, 128). Over time, they leveraged legal avenues to assert their demands and collectively acted to demand an amelioration in their conditions (Akpınar 2020, 105; Çelik 2005).

Attempting to further depress the wages and exert more control over workers risks prompting them to either abandon their positions in search of other means and networks to support themselves and their families, or to act collectively against the exploitative conditions imposed by company owners. As such, notwithstanding the lucrative opportunities extended by Turkey's local reserve army of labor to capitalist firms, certain legal and social constraints persisted, curtailing their complete exploitation, subjugation, and control. Surmounting these ostensibly inconsequential limitations held paramount significance, particularly for labor-intensive sectors such as agriculture, textiles, metal, construction, and hospitality, where the

[4] We must emphasize a crucial distinction between Syrian refugees in Turkey and labor migrants in other nations. Unlike countries such as Germany, the United States, Canada, and the Gulf states, where deliberate legal and institutional arrangements were made in the twentieth century to recruit international migrant labor for their national economies, Turkey's incorporation of the Syrian labor force was not a result of a deliberate state policy seeking "guest workers" from abroad. Instead, it stemmed primarily from political motivations and calculations as stated above.

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competitiveness and profitability of individual firms, both domestically and internationally, largely hinged on the utilization of the cheapest available labor. By assimilating Syrians, who originate from a war-torn geographic context, into the working class, Turkish capital had the chance to transcend these limits and enhanced its capacity for further exploitation, accumulation, and control.

There are three conspicuous ways in which the influx of Syrian refugees provides a spatial fix. The first is that the informal employment of Syrian refugees in Turkey reduces the cost of reproduction of labor power for Turkish business owners, which in turn reduces the overall real wages paid to the Syrian refugees. This is made possible by determining the requirements for the basic living conditions of Syrians not in reference to a socially accepted minimum subsistence level for Turkish citizens, but rather to a presumed threshold of survival for war exiles in a foreign country (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019b). This disparity is clearly visible in the significant differences between Syrian and Turkish working-class households, particularly in terms of access to domestic appliances (Yükseker et al. 2023), as well as in housing arrangements – such as multiple families sharing overcrowded and often substandard buildings.

In her remarkable article, Siviş illustrates how business owners would even employ moral justifications for hiring Syrians at lower wages, framing their employment as an opportunity to extend help to individuals seeking survival in a foreign territory (Siviş 2021). This differential wage and employment regime imposed on the Syrians is documented in various academic studies and reports focusing on different sectors where Syrians were employed. In agriculture, for example, the Syrian refugees received much less than the wages paid to Kurdish seasonal migrant workers as well as emigrants from Georgian and Azerbaijan (Dedeoğlu 2018, 54). As such, the Syrian refugees met the demand for the seasonal migrant workers for cultivated areas of high-value crops, requiring cheap and intense manual labor force for hoeing and harvesting (Pelek 2019, 608). Beyond the agricultural sector, Syrians employed in any sectors from textiles to construction endured significantly lower wages and longer working hours compared to their Turkish counterparts (Adar 2018; Balkan and Tumen 2016; Yılmaz 2020). In our fieldwork in İzmir, particularly in the textile and hospitality sectors, both the business owners we interviewed and the informally employed Syrian workers highlighted the differential wage regime imposed on refugees, as documented in our previous studies (Bélanger and Saracoglu 2020; Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019b).

Second, akin to temporary migrant workers globally, Syrian refugees have served as a readily "disposable" labor force for business owners (Karadağ 2023), providing them with a buffer against the ramifications of economic crises. The Syrian refugees alongside other migrant workers are often the first to be let go during downturns, bearing the brunt of production shrinkage. This trend was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019 and 2021, as documented by some studies, including our own. The experience of a 28-year-old Syrian woman worker, shared in the midst of the pandemic's uncertainty, offers a glimpse into how such patterns are lived and endured on the ground:

> Due to the pandemic, the workshop owner told us that he had to let us go and close down the workshop. I was working with my cousin as well, and we both

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> stayed at home ever since. We stayed home for about two to three months without any work at all, and then the previous lightbulb workshop contacted us again and told us that they have a big order and need workers. I worked for them, along with my cousins and some friends of mine for about two months until we finished the order and now, we are unemployed again.[5]

Many companies, facing reduced production capacities, swiftly terminated Syrian workers without notice or compensation. As lockdown measures eased and market opportunities re-emerged, these refugee workers were rehired, albeit under increasingly precarious conditions (Nimer and Rottmann 2022, 130).

Third, the integration of Syrian refugees facilitates the control and subjugation of the entire working class by eroding their bargaining power in relation to business owners. Employers now possessed the option to replace Turkish workers with Syrian refugees, who often accept lower wages and endure more precarious and exploitative working conditions. This phenomenon is evidenced in İzmir, where our research reveals widespread discontent among Turkish and Kurdish workers employed informally in shoe workshops in the Işıkkent district. Previously, these workers exerted collective pressure on employers to raise wages. However, as other research also demonstrates, with the influx of Syrian refugees as a surplus labor force, their ability to leverage collective action has been significantly diminished (Çınar 2018; Kavak 2016, 51).

Consequently, Turkish workers faced challenges in negotiating for better wages and improved working conditions from their employers. Seyhan Erdoğdu, in her meticulous article on the approach of labor unions to Syrian refugee workers, documents that "although low-wage informal Syrian labor is currently employed in micro or small enterprises rather than in firms where unionized workers are employed, employers use the presence of informal Syrian labor to counter union demands during collective wage negotiations" (Erdoğdu 2018, 847). As observed in other regions hosting immigrants, the integration of Syrian refugees into the Turkish labor market has operated as a "regulatory labor market tool" (Bauder 2006, 5).

Other advantages of hiring Syrian refugees for business owners include the widespread exploitation of child labor (Aytaç and Kılınç 2021; Dayıoğlu et al. 2024; Yalçın 2016) and workplace abuses, as well as the widespread and systematic incidences of wage theft (unpaid wages) (Ağlargöz and Yardımcı 2019, 545; *Bélanger* and Saraçoğlu 2022; Çoban 2018, 206) as reported in many studies. Indeed Turkish workers also face pressure from business owners to accept lower real wages, the postponement or reduction of promised payments (wage theft), and unsafe working conditions. Syrian refugees are subjected to all of these abusive and exploitative working conditions, albeit in different forms, to a much greater extent, and, most importantly, without any legal or social restraints.

Our fieldwork interviews conducted in İzmir with Syrian workers from the textile and shoe manufacturing sectors revealed that their efforts to voice concerns about prolonged working hours, abysmally low wages, and wage theft are routinely ignored. Our research, corroborated by other studies (Kızılelmas 2023, 737), documents instances where such complaints have led to physical violence inflicted upon these

[5] Authors' fieldwork in İzmir (see notes 1 and 2).

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workers by business owners and their associates when they persistently sought payment for their unpaid wages. When this type of abuse and violence occurs, the Syrians are hesitant to go to the police and file a complaint because doing so would be an acknowledgment of their informal work and they would be fined. Our interviewees reported that when they go to state officials to file a complaint, their reports are ignored and, in some cases, they are threatened with deportation. Deniz Pelek in her research with Syrian agricultural workers addresses the same phenomenon stating that "although no such decision has been made, the sheer fear of deportability is imposed on Syrians to leave them in a more fragile position and to reduce their bargaining power" against their employers (Pelek 2019, 620). The threat of deportation used against refugees – and its role in reinforcing workers' docility when they demand unpaid wages or resist exploitative working conditions – is likely to be even more pronounced for non-status irregular migrants, such as Afghans, as documented by Karadağ and Sert (2023) in their recent research.

Under such conditions, Syrian workers have almost no leeway to oppose the "government" of capitalists at work. In this context, without state oversight of refugees' informal employment, the precarious status of Syrians positions them similarly to "irregular" and undocumented workers globally, who, due to their potential deportability, are regarded as "a distinctly disposable commodity" by business owners (De Genova 2002, 438).

As a result, at the level of production relations, that is, in the workplace, Syrians became directly subservient to the will and dictates of the business owners and are left to their mercy. The terms and conditions of the labor process are governed not by state laws and regulations, but by the will of the business owners themselves. Thus, the state that helped to form an informal work force of Syrian refugees, through its temporary protection regime and the agreement it signed with the EU in 2016, delegated the task of governing the refugees at the workplace to business owners. Rather than enforcing its laws to punish and deter illegal employment, Turkish authorities openly acknowledge the ostensible benefits to the Turkish economy and implicitly encourage it. As a result, the state appears to be absent in governing refugees in the workplace; however, this is a deliberate "strategic absence" (Gill 2010, 639). Owing to the strategic absence of the state's formalized and institutionalized aspects, business owners can take advantage of Syrian refugee labor power in ways that would be impossible if they hired Turkish workers, and they have an unrestricted space of action to govern the refugees at the workplaces.

## The level of reproduction: ideology, control, and discipline

At this juncture, an essential question arises: how does the substantial labor force, subjected to various exploitative methods and enduring distinct forms of abuse, persist in a state of subservience to capital's mandates even after a decade of residing in the host country? Put differently, what enables the ongoing functionality of this spatial fix, maintaining its grip on Syrian refugees in Turkey over an extended period? In protracted residency scenarios like these, migrant workers are anticipated to establish internal organizations, foster bonds of solidarity, and collectively wield influence to challenge the extraordinary exploitation they face. Despite sporadic instances of enhancements in specific sectors, such incremental improvements are

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neither widespread nor robust enough to liberate Syrian refugees from the pervasive cycle of exploitation and abuse. How is this persistence conceivable? Exploring this question directs our attention to the locus of the "reproduction" of labor power – the urban social life and, more specifically, everyday life, where specific controlling mechanisms are applied to Syrian refugee workers. As Sam Scott puts it aptly, "labor power is produced and reproduced beyond the workplace involving wider social processes and non-work institutions" (Scott 2013, 1093).

As stated in the previous section, the working conditions and wages offered to the informally employed Syrian refugees are designated along the lines of reproducing not the minimum subsistence level of a Turkish household but the bare survival of a non-citizen war exile from a different country. As such, the incomes that they obtain from the work typically meet only the daily essentials such as food, rent, gas and electricity for the biological reproduction of the Syrian working families. The temporary protection regime that recognizes the right of the registered Syrians to benefit from public health services contributes to this biological reproduction. In addition, the aforementioned ESSN cash transfer sponsored by the EU also makes the differential wage and labor regime that the Syrian refugees face more bearable for them and contributes to the reproduction of the Syrian labor power (Cetinoglu and Yilmaz 2021).

Domestic and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in the governance of the Syrian populace, primarily through their needs-based assistance and social cohesion initiatives (Danış and Nazlı 2019; Mackreath and Sağnıç 2017). While these programs aid Syrians in maintaining their living standards within urban areas, the NGOs, when considered collectively, do not have a coherent rights-based rationality in regards to the refugees (Keysan and Şentürk 2021) and often encounter various structural limitations that hinder their potential to foster significant empowerment (Bélanger and Saracoglu 2020; Özçetin and Emre 2024). Consequently, these constraints restrict the capacity of these initiatives to address and rectify the prevailing unequal conditions experienced by many Syrians. More fundamentally, as is the case for the working class in general, the patriarchal family structure and hence the unpaid domestic labor of the Syrian women is essential for the majority of the Syrian households for the reproduction of the labor power of the Syrian working men and hence the continuation of the expolitative relations in the workplace (Adar 2018, 28; Yalim and Critelli 2023).

All these reproductive mechanisms need to be taken into account for the maintenance of the differential labor regime that the Syrian workers were exposed to and individually carefully analyzed. Ultimately, they indicate how some of the costs associated with reproducing the labor power of Syrian refugees, as well as the task of governance, are shifted onto the state, NGOs, and women in the domestic space. Without undermining the significance of the various mechanisms outlined earlier, each of which could independently warrant dedicated research, this section develops arguments on the ideological and coercive reproduction of the exploitative conditions endured by the Syrian laboring population over the past decade.

The concept of "ideological reproduction" employed here draws from the general Marxist understanding of ideology. While debates surrounding the concept of ideology have been prominent among Western Marxists throughout the twentieth century, contemporary critical social theorists have reinterpreted and expanded it

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over the past two decades (Jaeggi 2009, 63). These reinterpretations incorporate significant epistemological nuances to address the interconnected perpetuation of racial, gender, and class oppression. In this paper, we conceptualize ideology as widely shared dominant beliefs and convictions that are epistemically misleading in terms of concealing or distorting the inner dynamics behind different social phenomena but functional in maintaining existing power structures (Geuss 1981, 13–21; Larrain 1979, 48; Thompson 1990, 7). This evaluative and critical framework, as adapted within the context of critical race studies, highlights the role of such ideologies in perpetuating systemic inequalities (Shelby 2003). Ideologies have materiality in terms of shaping public attitudes and practices in ways that sustain and reproduce existing forms of oppression.

This article does not intend to exhaustively engage with the recent nuanced debates about the relationship between the critique of ideology and political economy, nor the strategic implications of ideology critique for political action (Battistoni 2024; Celikates 2006; Haslanger 2017; Jaeggi 2009; Sankaran 2020). For the purposes of this discussion, it suffices to assert that "ideology critique" remains indispensable for understanding how Syrians have been governed in Turkey over the past decade. More specifically, we analyze the ideological reproduction of Syrians' subordinate status within everyday life – not as an isolated process that merely reinforces ethnic or racial hierarchies in Turkish society but as a mechanism deeply intertwined with the broader reproduction of capitalist social formation and the perpetuation of associated class relations.

To this end, we adopt a "unitary approach," as developed by Marxist feminists and anti-racist Marxists, which links diverse forms of ideology to the reproduction of the capitalist social order as a unified system (Berman 2022; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018; Vogel 2013). This framework connects the reservoir of anti-Syrian discourses, symbols, ideas, and practices to broader dynamics of class inequality and the structural reproduction of these inequalities in Turkey. In this context, "ideological reproduction" refers to the systematic normalization and legitimization of Syrian refugees' subordinate status through a complex interplay of speech acts, discourses, representations, and associated practices embedded across diverse dimensions of social life. This process not only reinforces hierarchical frameworks of belonging and exclusion but also sustains the institutional arrangements, policies, and everyday practices that materialize the marginalization and oppression of Syrians. It functions simultaneously as a cognitive and structural mechanism, naturalizing exclusionary frameworks within societal norms and practices while shaping the material dynamics of structural reproduction.

As for the coercive reproduction, in reference to Erik Olin Wright, we define it as "various processes which raise the cost of collective challenges to existing structures of power and privilege by imposing various kinds of punishments on people for those actions" (Wright 2010, 195). In our context, coercive reproduction involves the imposition of crude force in the daily experiences of Syrian refugees, aimed at suppressing both their current and potential demands and objections. This coercion functions to uphold their subordinate position, thereby obstructing any opportunity for expanding their agency within societal realms. It is crucial to acknowledge the intricate interplay between the ideological and coercive processes. While coercive practices directly suppress the actions and voices of refugees, they also render them

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more susceptible to exclusionary discourses and practices. Simultaneously, ideological processes that marginalize Syrians from the realm of rights-bearing individuals justify and normalize the use of violence against them. Consequently, both ideological and coercive processes synergistically perpetuate the exploitative relations of production experienced by Syrian refugees within urban contexts.

### *Ideological reproduction*

Herald Bauder, examining the perpetuation of immigrants' subordinate status in labor processes compared to citizens, utilizes the term "cultural representations" to describe specific depictions of migrant workers, which are then used to rationalize "denying international migrants high wages and decent labor standards" (Bauder 2006, 29). Nevertheless, in light of the conceptual discussion outlined above, the term "ideological reproduction" appears more appropriate in this context, given the evident link between these images/discourses and the perpetuation of class domination.

To comprehensively understand the workings of ideological processes concerning Syrians, it is imperative to delve into the prevalent anti-migrant sentiments, particularly the widespread anti-Syrian attitudes deeply ingrained within Turkish society. The influx of Syrian refugees into urban centers has engendered a pervasive and often blunt hostility towards them. Anti-Syrian sentiments permeate various strata of society, cutting across socio-economic divides; both lower and upper classes may harbor xenophobic prejudices to differing extents and expressed in diverse manners. As a recent survey demonstrates, a prevailing consensus among these groups is the perception of refugees as an unsustainable burden on Turkey, a country already grappling with economic fragility (Erdoğan 2022). Syrians are commonly perceived either as a symptom or a root cause of long-standing "issues" and anxieties within Turkish society (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019a). To some, they symbolize Arab culture, synonymous with extreme Islam, thus embodying the apex of Turkey's perceived Islamization. Others view Syrians as an economic menace, attributing wage stagnation, displacement, and unemployment to their informal labor practices (Pelek 2019, 622). Misinformation propagated on social media further exacerbates these prejudices, painting Syrians as "benefit scroungers" exploiting state aid and services unfairly.

These biases and apprehensions manifest openly and unapologetically across various facets of life, including political discourse and media platforms, devoid of any filter of political correctness. Social media, alongside conventional mass media, notably exacerbates the trivialization and normalization of discrimination and hatred against Syrian refugees, owing to its susceptibility to bottom-up vulgar communication platforms that circulate overt, toxic, and unfiltered anti-migrant discourses (Erdogan-Ozturk and Isik-Guler 2020; Bozdağ 2020; Ozduzen et al. 2021). Political parties, including the center-left Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; CHP), often echo these sentiments in their rhetoric to court support and votes from segments of the populace disgruntled with the Syrian refugee presence (Secen et al. 2024). Additionally, Turkey's political landscape has witnessed the emergence of a new Turkist and nationalist party, the Victory Party (Zafer Partisi; ZP), led by Umit

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Özdağ, which prominently positions the so-called "Syrian invasion" at the forefront of its political agenda.

Through relentless propaganda, this party blames a myriad of socio-economic and political problems in Turkey on the presence of Syrian refugees, framing their mass repatriation as urgently necessary to resolve these issues (Türk 2024). This portrayal of migrants, especially Syrians, as the source of many societal problems has deeply influenced all aspects of urban social life. It has become a "dominant discourse" that helps sustain existing class dynamics (Raiter 1999).

The prevailing anti-migrant and anti-Syrian discourse within Turkish society plays a significant role in perpetuating the specific labor conditions experienced by Syrian refugees in several ways. First, as a population generally perceived as undeserving of a permanent, dignified, and "normal" social life in Turkish society, the rampant exploitation, egregious abuses, and even physical violence they endure in workplaces fail to garner attention within the Turkish public sphere. Consequently, these injustices remain unaddressed and are not subject to ethical or political condemnation, thereby emboldening Turkish capital-owners to impose their exploitative labor regime upon Syrian refugees with impunity.

Second, given that anti-Syrian sentiments permeate all sectors of society, including the citizen workers, the opportunities for Syrian refugees to forge connections with Turkish workers and garner their support in challenging exploitative working conditions are severely constrained (Pelek 2019, 621). As seen historically in various social contexts where migrant labor has been employed, the connection between its utilization and a fragmented working class – resulting in reduced potential for collective resistance – serves as an advantage for capital (Scott 2013, 1095). The conviction among Turkish workers that refugees are one of the reasons for their loss of bargaining power against company owners hampers the potential for a united collective resistance to exploitative relations (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019a). This perpetuates existing relations of exploitation in the workplace, allowing them to persist unchecked and unaltered.

Third, the pervasive perception of Syrians as a societal burden, coupled with calls for their deportation, often serves as a pretext for instances of brutal physical violence against Syrian refugees within urban areas. These instances of violence can erupt spontaneously and unpredictably in any public setting (Akbaş and Ulutaş 2018, 173; Kızılelmas 2023, 733). Their visibility and intensity escalate notably when refugees, either individually or collectively, endeavor to challenge the entrenched power dynamics they confront, asserting their limited agency within urban social contexts. These incidences of assault not only underscore the boundaries of refugees' permissible actions in urban spaces and social interactions but also serve as a stark reminder of the consequences they may face for exceeding these boundaries (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2021). Thus, violent assaults function as a disciplinary mechanism shaping the entirety of urban life for Syrian refugees, restraining them in contexts where they are subjected to injustice, particularly within workplaces characterized by rampant exploitation and various forms of abuse. It is at this point where one can explore how ideological and coercive domination are intermingled and act in unison to reproduce domination and exploitation in the relations of production.

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### Coercive reproduction

Coercive repression against Syrian refugees occurs across various aspects of social life, involving different actors. Instances documented in our research in İzmir reveal a troubling trend: owners of capital in workplaces resorting to physical violence against refugee workers when they demand unpaid wages or protest mistreatment. As they have no contact with the unionized workers and the unions in Turkey did not develop so far a solid outlook regarding the state of refugee workers, they cannot benefit from class solidarity networks (Erdoğdu 2018, 842). These acts often go unpunished by state authorities, who, instead of implementing preventive measures, threaten refugees with deportation for reporting informal work.

Moreover, there are cases where state security forces intervene directly, using force or deportation tactics against refugees participating in collective actions to improve their conditions. However, the most evident forms of coercive violence come from ordinary citizens, often as mass assaults or mob violence. Disagreements between Turkish and Syrian individuals in shared neighborhoods often act as precursors to violent attacks targeting refugees and their properties (De Andrade 2020; Şimşek 2021, 2817). These confrontations, frequently framed as localized disputes, remain unnoticed by the broader public unless they culminate in severe casualties or escalate into fully fledged pogroms, as in Altındağ, Ankara, in August 2021, when mobs launched coordinated attacks on Syrian homes and businesses, or in Kayseri in July 2024, where similar violence forced numerous refugees to abandon the area. These episodes of mass violence, while appearing sporadic, underscore the entrenched dynamics of exclusion and hostility faced by Syrian refugees in urban contexts. Instead of sparking accountability from public authorities or eliciting moral condemnation from society, such incidents are often reframed as further evidence of the supposed dangers posed by the refugee presence in Turkey. This framing serves not only to legitimize violence against Syrians but also to reinforce a broader narrative that casts them as inherently incompatible with Turkish society.

This recontextualization of violence shifts responsibility away from the perpetrators and toward the victims, perpetuating a discourse that portrays refugees as societal threats rather than individuals subjected to systemic marginalization. Such narratives find resonance across various strata of society, effectively normalizing hostility toward Syrians and rendering acts of violence against them socially acceptable or even inevitable. Consequently, these ideological framings embolden both state and non-state actors to impose coercive measures on Syrian refugees with impunity, further entrenching their subjugation and exploitation.

These acts have significant and enduring effects on the everyday life of Syrian communities. As we documented in one of our previous articles, fear of mob violence leads Syrians to self-regulate their behavior in accordance with the perceived threat, limiting their collective presence and actions in neighborhoods and workplaces (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2021). In her study, Kızılelmas outlines several everyday responses adopted by Syrians to navigate away from discrimination and violence. These include:

> consciously remaining silent to negative words, not walking the streets alone to avoid threats, working in isolated workplaces to hide from the police,

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> establishing unconditional positive social relations with local people, socializing and developing business connections, and gathering in certain areas where conationals gather (Kızılelmas 2023, 739).

If we adhere to the definition of tactics as "manipulating events to turn them into opportunities" (De Certeau 1984, xix), then these actions do not fit within the realm of tactics. Rather, they epitomize Syrians' efforts to navigate their precarious and vulnerable position within urban social dynamics, representing a profound manifestation of self-discipline. Our fieldwork revealed that certain Syrian workers have internalized the constraints set by a network of actors regulating Syrian refugees, even to the point of blaming their co-nationals for incidents that lead Turkish citizens to generalize the perceived "wrongdoings" of a few individuals to the broader Syrian community. The following ambivalent perspective shared by a male Syrian worker during an interview in the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 reinforces and validates our earlier observations, which were discussed in a prior publication (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2021):

> I would definitely feel a lot better about staying here if I had the citizenship, or permanent residency. I am currently considered as a guest in this country; any moment they can ... you know, anything is possible. If I had the citizenship or permanent residency, I wouldn't need to worry about anything, but we live in this constant state of fear. We feel somewhat safe here, but the fear is still there because they can force us to leave at any moment and get deported. It's bittersweet ... I just hate it when one Syrian acts negatively and it reflects badly on all Syrians. One small example, if one Syrian eats at the park in an improper way; they don't say he's a bad person, no they say all Syrians are like that. It's not fair; it's not fair to generalize. But the Syrians have brought this upon ourselves; it's almost like the word "Syrian" has been permanently linked with negative connotations.[6]

Certainly, Syrians have developed various proactive methods to mitigate and challenge the oppression they encounter. A few interviewees in our fieldwork shared instances where they benefited from the assistance of individuals connected to refugee-related NGOs and even took collective action, organizing small-scale protests to demand unpaid wages from their employers. As one interviewee described:

> We declared we were going to stop working until we got paid, and it worked; the boss came and paid us. The boss heard our complaints and gave us what we wanted, so we went back to work, and he became consistent with our salaries and was never late again.[7]

Yet, to date, these sporadic acts and gains have not led to significant or lasting improvements for the Syrian community, nor have they exerted enough influence to

[6] Authors' fieldwork in İzmir (see notes 1 and 2).
[7] Ibid.

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catalyze progressive shifts within the broader framework of ideological and coercive control that sustains the exploitative conditions that they confront.

The interviews we conducted with Syrian refugee workers in İzmir reveal a concerning reluctance on the part of police forces to effectively intervene and deter attacks. Complaints are often dismissed, and victims are discouraged from seeking justice due to threats of deportation, leaving them defenseless against urban violence (Kızılelmas 2023). Therefore, akin to the scenario in workplaces, the state's strategic absence creates unbridled spaces for neighborhood citizens to exert pressure on Syrian refugees, shaping their everyday urban experiences and perpetuating exploitative dynamics. Coercive violence, by disciplining refugees and deterring their attempts to assert their rights, plays a crucial role in reproducing the exploitative conditions faced by Syrian informal workers in urban settings. As a result, the governance of Syrians extends beyond the purview of the state's repressive apparatus to encompass the realms of everyday urban life, where ordinary citizens play an active role alongside official institutions.

## Conclusion

Building on our analysis, we are now at the position to be able to answer the question of who governs refugees in Turkey and how. Our three-tiered investigation of the Syrians' incorporation into the informal labor processes in Turkey, including the levels of formation, production, and reproduction, reveals that the governance of refugees extends far beyond official entities such as the government, NGOs, and international organizations, and cannot be confined to purely legal or institutional frameworks, contrary to the assumptions of much conventional scholarship. Non-state actors, including employers, local residents, and even the refugees themselves, actively participate in the governance process. These actors do not operate in isolation; instead, their efforts converge within a broad, flexible, and informal governance system. The state, through both its actions and inactions, creates an environment that enables these informal actors to assume roles in governance. Thus, the lines between formal and informal governance are blurred, with informality emerging not in opposition to, but often with the implicit endorsement of, the state.

The dynamics examined across the three levels of formation, production, and reproduction are not unique to Syrian refugees. Rather, they reveal broader mechanisms through which capitalist states govern surplus and precarious populations under contemporary conditions. This highlights how the governance of Syrians – particularly their incorporation into informal labor markets under exploitative conditions – represents a broader capitalist logic that treats forced and irregularized migrants as surplus populations to "spatially fix" obstacles to capital accumulation and profit maximization. The laboring conditions of refugees are not merely a subject of scholarly concern; they serve as a lens through which the broader logics of class domination at large – woven through statecraft, informal governance, and everyday coercion – can be critically apprehended.

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