Anuac
Rivista della Società italiana di antropologia culturale

11 (2) | 2022
Anuac Vol 11 No 2 (2022)

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/anuac/410
DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-4932
ISSN: 2239-625X

Publisher
Società italiana di antropologia culturale

Printed version
Number of pages: 127-150

Electronic reference
Ayşe Seda Yüksel, ““Economic nationalisms” and the immediacy of war”, *Anuac* [Online], 11 (2) | 2022, Online since 23 December 2022, connection on 11 October 2024. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/anuac/410 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.7340/anuac2239-625X-4932

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2022 | Anuac. Vol. 11, n° 2, Dicembre 2022: 127-150

"Economic nationalisms" and the immediacy of war

Turkey's Syrian policy

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Abstract: This article examines the current economic nationalisms in Turkey through the lens of the effects of the Syrian war. The empirical focus of my discussion is Gaziantep, an export city bordering Syria. The city has been radically shaped not only by the migration waves from Syria in the wake of the Syrian war but also by the broader re/structuring effects of the Iraq war and a low-intensity war in the last 30 years. In Turkey, wars have always been essential reference points for local and national economic agents to build different nation-framed economic discourses. In the last decade, we observe a new form of economic nationalism that is expansionist and outward-oriented – contrary to discussions associating the term with inward-oriented economic policies. Turkey's assumed role in the reconstitution of the Syrian economy and its aspired position in the Middle East as a political, economic, and military center constitutes a crucial symbolic horizon in this nationalist economic discourse.

Keywords: Economic nationalism; Syrian war; Migration; Warfare; Turkey.

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"Economic nationalisms" and the immediacy of war. Turkey's Syrian policy.
2022 | Anuac. Vol. 11, n° 2, Dicembre 2022: 127-150.
ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-4932

Introduction[1]

> I am in Gaziantep, an export hub bordering Syria, to attend the annual Development Agencies Conference bringing together the representatives of the newly established Development Agencies all around Turkey. It is the third year of the Syrian war; tens of kilometers away from the skirmishes, we discuss the new draft of the Development Policy during the planetary meeting held in the city's colossal congress complex. The room is full of young aspiring graduates of the best public universities in Turkey who have started their government jobs recently. "These are the best minds of the state bureaucracy," my friend, a former bureaucrat, tells me. Gaziantep's local development agency representative welcomes us "with hopes for a prosperous future". After a short introduction on the 5-year development policy of the Ministry of Development, he briefs the audience on Gaziantep's economic profile over the last five years. Gaziantep is taken as the pinnacle of neoliberal Turkey by national media and the paragon of its primary developmental strategy in the last 30 years, namely export-led growth. His short introduction proudly underlines this popular image. During his talk, the city's export rates catch my attention. The city has almost doubled its export volume in the last five years, particularly during the height of the Syrian war. After the panel, I approach him to ask about the export numbers in his talk. "This export boom is the Gaziantep miracle," he responds. "The people of Gaziantep create miracles in the direst conditions [...] Another miracle is how the city shelters our Syrian guests". He refers to the Syrian refugees who fled the war and took refuge in the border cities[2].
>
> Later in the afternoon, I meet Aykan in his office. Aykan is a businessperson that I interviewed several times during my fieldwork back in the 2010s. He and his friends discuss the changing dynamics of the Syrian war and its reflections on the local economy. I join the conversation by questioning Gaziantep's export boom to Syria under war conditions. A short silence follows my question. One of them responds: "This is no surprise. War is good for trade if you know well who controls the other side of the border [...]"[3].

1. The early version of this paper was presented at the AAA/CASCA Annual Meeting in 2019 in the roundtable titled *Transnational Perspectives on Economic Nationalism and Contested Belonging*. I would like to thank the organizer, Ann Kingsolver, the chair, Chandana Matur and the participants of the roundtable for their valuable comments. I benefited greatly from the comments and suggestions of the article's two anonymous reviewers; I am thankful to them. I am also indebted to Dana Mckelvey who proofread and edited my essay with great precision. Editing of this article was funded by the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna.

2. Since 2011, Turkey has been receiving refugees displaced by the ongoing war in Syria. As of 2021, 98.7 percent of 3.7 million Syrians residing in Turkey live in towns and cities. Syrians in Turkey are not recognized legally as refugees. Turkey signed the 1951 Geneva Convention with a geographical limitation. Due to this limitation, only recognized refugees who have sought asylum as a result of "events occurring in Europe" can benefit from asylum rights whereas the rest of the world falls under the category of "people with temporary protection status" (Kirişçi 1996).
3. Field notes, April 2014.

In this article, I examine the economic nationalism of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) through the lens of its militarized foreign policy endeavors in Syria and its refugee policy by focusing on the city of Gaziantep. In the last decade, we observe a new form of economic nationalism that is expansionist and outward-oriented, contrary to the traditional forms that are based on national sovereignty and economic autonomy. I argue that AKP's novel economic nationalism cannot be comprehended without engaging with the politico-economic dynamics of the war in Syria. Wars are important symbolic reference points for mobilizing or persuading populations in pursuit of specific economic agendas and aims. Alternatively, the immediacy and necessity of wars may enforce certain economic agendas or policies on people.

Gaziantep is an explicative case in discussing many elements of the relations between economic nationalisms and wars: the city is located at the edge of the Kurdish region in Turkey that has been shaped by the low-intensity war between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Worker's Party. The city's economy has been shaped by the spill-out effects of US interventions in Iraq and the war in Syria. In the previous 20 years, Gaziantep has gradually become one of the political castles of the AKP government. The city, known as "little Syria," accommodates around 420,000 Syrians, constituting more than 20 percent of its total population. After Istanbul, the city is home to Turkey's second most populous Syrian migrant community (Erdogan 2020).

The first part of the paper is devoted to a brief conceptual discussion on economic nationalism and the characteristics of the pro-Islamist AKP's economic nationalism in the last decade. The second part is devoted to analyzing the implications of AKP's economic nationalism in its migration policy and military interventions in Syria. The third part examines how AKP's nationalist discourses are locally reproduced and challenged in Gaziantep. The case of Gaziantep proves that economic nationalist discourses are not solely produced by states but also actively adopted and locally reproduced by local actors. The last part focuses on the limitations of AKP's economic nationalism by showing how other economic nationalisms and nation-framed economic discourses challenge it in local politics. The article shows that although the Syrian war has invigorated the transformative and mobilizing power of AKP's economic nationalism in the last decade, it has not been sufficient to turn it into a hegemonic discourse.

Putting AKP's militarist/populist economic nationalism in context

economic nationalism is a vague term in both academic and popular discourse. The mainstream definition that emerged in the interwar period refers to an umbrella concept identifying a wide variety of policies that supposedly fall outside liberal economics, ranging from tariffs and quotas to restrictions on foreign investments and state subsidies in domestic activities (Nakano 2004: 211). In the 2000s, this policy-focused traditional approach has been under harsh criticism for reflecting neither the current conditions nor the history of liberalism (Helleiner 2002; Abdelal 2018; Helleiner, Pickel 2018; Pickel 2003). These scholars argue that economic nationalism should be seen as the context of economic policies and a facet of national identity rather than a package of "protectionist" policies. Thus, the study of economic nationalism involves how "national identities and nationalism shape economic policies and processes in diverse and complex ways" (Helleiner 2018: 221, 224) rather than a discussion on the outcomes of the policies.

In a recent article, Baltz (2021) addresses the term's conceptual inconsistencies and historical diversity. However, he insists on the need to employ it as a conceptual lens to investigate the current nationalist rhetoric and policy responses. Baltz defines economic nationalism as various "national discourses" produced and practiced by different actors to articulate their agendas in economic affairs. Economic nationalism cannot be seen as an ensemble of policies but rather discourses that work as "practical categories" (Brubaker 2010: 13) for actors to legitimize their acts and policies (Baltz 2021). To examine the workings of economic nationalism, we need to consider categories and normative ideas in nation-framed discourses attached to economic policies. Among these normative ideas, the category of national interest is of particular importance. In their attempts to steer policymaking processes, political and economic actors practically employ discourses about perceived "national interests" to legitimize their policy agendas and to discredit their political opponents and economic rivals.

Economic nationalism has always been a dominant discourse in the Turkish economy from early on, and local industrialization was its most significant project. In the late Ottoman context starting from 1908, the ideal of economic nationalism was based on four pillars: economic autonomy, national industrialization, elimination of non-Muslims from the economic sphere, and creation of a national business class in the Ottoman Empire (Ahmad 2014; Toprak 1994). These pillars were maintained during the Turkish Republic and

adopted by its Kemalist ideology[4] (Keyder 1987; Aktar 2006). From the Republic's early years, the nationalist goals of economic autonomy, national industrialization, and developmentalism led to a strong etatism and state-led import-substitution policies (Keyder 1987; Toprak 1982, Buğra 1995). In this inward-oriented economy, national economic interests laid in the economic favoritism of groups aligned with Turkish nationalism for an autonomous national economy. Governments fed economic nationalist sentiments by casting national minorities, particularly Armenians and Kurdish minorities, as "possible threats to the nation"[5].

As many scholars argue, the AKP embraced a new understanding of Turkish nationalism that challenged its predecessor, Kemalist nationalism, in many ways. Saracoglu and Demirkol (2015: 306-307) claim that the most significant change in AKP's conception of nationalism is the increasing weight of Muslimhood in the definition of the nation.[6] Sunni-Muslim values have become the core elements of the Turkish nation, whereas the Ottoman past has become the central reference point (Kaya 2020). Moreover, the AKP's Islamist and neo-Ottomanist nationalism has brought on a new conception of territory:

> While Kemalist nationalism construed Turkish territories from a 'defensive' perspective as a homeland that had been liberated from and had to be protected against the supposedly unending conspiracies of foreign and domestic 'enemies,' AKP's nationalism sees the same geography from a rather more ambitious position; as a cultural and political 'center' from which the political influence of the Turkish state, as the heir of the Ottoman Empire, could be extended into the Balkans, Caucasus, and Middle East (Saracoglu, Demirkol 2015: 312).

4. Kemalist ideology is the founding official ideology of Turkey, which has put modernization, secularism and westernization at its center (Bozdogan, Kasaba 2011). Kemalist ideology has been criticized for not being compatible with liberal democracy (Parla, Davison 2004), and being extremely repressive towards non-Muslim, ethnic and Islamist communities (Göçek 1996; Yavuz 2003).
5. There is substantial literature on the links between minorities, Turkish nationalism, and economic policies. For the transfer of wealth from Christian communities, see Bali 2011 on the infamous Capital Levy; Kuyucu 2005 on pogroms of September 1955; Yilmaz 2012 on the appropriation of Armenian properties. Turkey's economic nationalist policies against the Kurdish people have been framed through the argument of economic disparities and the de-development of the Kurdish regions in Turkey (Yadirgi 2017; Sonmez 1992; Besikci 1969).
6. With its roots in the Islamist movement since 1970s, the AKP presented itself as a synthesis of democratic secular politics and religious appeal for the Turkish people (Cizre, Çınar 2003; Hale, Özbudun 2010). However, the consequent electoral victories in 2007 and 2011 have resulted in a slow trend of autocratization processes in which religious (Yabanci 2021: 3) and nationalist references have become visible.

The exceptionality of AKP nationalism can be best understood from the party's unique formulation of "national interests." The AKP gradually receded from its position as "a typical candidate country of the EU" (Onis 2014) and defined being a regional economic and military power in the geographies of the Ottoman imperial history within Turkey's national interests. Turkey's highly disputed military operations in Syria[7] and its military presence in Libya and Iraq serve its national goal of becoming a regional economic leader and an expanding military power. A recent report states that in the last five years, the AKP government has increased its overseas military bases by placing more than 15.000 troops in the Middle East and Africa, especially in Syria, Qatar, and Somalia (Adar *et al*. 2020).

The AKP's expansionist militarist nationalism is accompanied by a populist discourse that dramatically reshaped the internal dynamics of Turkish politics. Since its early days in power, the AKP's political discourse has been built upon a harsh criticism of the elitism of Kemalist and Republican groups that suppressed the will and the core values of the Turkish people (Taş 2020). This earlier version of populism has gradually become more exclusionary and aggressive by constructing a dichotomy between the people as a nation and the enemies within. AKP's economic nationalism is colored by three leitmotifs: a transnational claim to the regional leadership of Muslimhood, an exclusionary nationalism pitting the deserving Turkish people against the undeserving ones (Yabanci 2021: 13, 23), and an increasing militarist discourse based on the immediacy of Turkey's military power and war, particularly in Syria.

AKP's militarist/populist economic nationalism- at-work

in the last decade, Turkey has seen a radical authoritarian shift accelerated by a fluid geopolitical environment due to the Syrian war and a less assertive European Union (Öktem, Akkoyunlu 2016). After the June 2015 elections which signaled the end to the AKP's dominant party status in the parliament, this authoritarian shift has increased its pace.[8] The AKP has adopted a more securitized and militarized nationalist discourse in economic affairs – a

7. Turkey has conducted four major military operations to Syria until now: Euphrates Shield initiated in 2016 targeting the al-Bab region, Olive Branch initiated in 2018 targeting the Afrin region, Peace Spring initiated in 2019 targeting the region between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad and the Spring Shield initiated in 2020 targeting the Idlib region.
8. The fall of the Peace Process between the PKK and the Turkish state and the restart of war in Kurdish cities in 2015 and 2016, and a failed coup d'état in 2016 constituted the milestones of this new authoritarianism, which relies on judicial and economic pressures on opposing but also controlling the media (Somer 2016).

discourse of "national survival" and national unity in the face of attacks by internal and external enemies that aim to hinder Turkey's progress (Taş 2020)[9]. This discourse on national unity and survival has become most visible in 2018 when Erdogan stated that he would start economic warfare against the external powers as a remedy to the currency crisis:

> If they have dollars, we have our people, righteousness, and God... The interest rate lobby will not be able to crush this nation. Our responsibility is to you, not to George or Hans, but to Ahmet, Mehmet, and Ayse. [...] They tried everything to bring our country to our knees (Yackley 2018)[10].

He called on Turkish people to sell their dollars and euros to buy lira: "If there are dollars under your pillow, take these out... Immediately give these to the banks and convert to the Turkish lira, and by doing this, we fight this war of independence" (Pamuk 2018). The "economic warfare" and "economic independence war" against external and internal enemies have gradually become central themes in AKP discourse. In the last four years, the government has called on the Turkish people several times to participate in the "economic war" against the "dark forces" by selling their currencies or managing their consumption habits (*Bilgic* 2020; *Diken* 2020)

Economic nationalism renders people members of a community by generating sentiments of autonomy, pride, prestige, and distinctiveness, if not superiority and uniqueness (Müller 2005: 141). In the AKP's recent nationalist discourse, the words *yerli* (indigenous) and *milli* (national) have become common referents to define economic progress and prosperity. The AKP promoted various indigenous products such as an "indigenous and national automobile" helicopter and telecommunications. The growing Turkish defense industry under the rule of the AKP and the ideal of defense autarky has also become "political capital" for the AKP to reaffirm national pride in technical prowess (Bağcı, Kurç 2017). Between 2008 and 2017, Turkish military expenditure increased by 46 percent to reach $18.2 billion, making it the 15th largest spender globally (Tian *et al.* 2018). Aviation and defense exports significantly increased during the same period. According to reports by Stockholm Inter-

9. The enemies to the nation have been vaguely defined as "interest-rate lobby," terrorist groups, separatists, "coalitions," and "Western actors" (Yüksel-Pecen 2018; Göknar 2020).
10. The currency crisis was sparked when U.S. President Donald Trump doubled tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminum imports. The lira fell 18 % in one day. From January to August 2018, the value of Turkey's currency lost more than 34% of its value against the dollar. Retrieved March 2019 from https://www.ft.com/content/f33b9b90-9c8c-11e8-9702-5946bae86e6d

national Peace Research Institute, Turkey is among the three fastest-growing arm exporters in the world. Between 2014 and 2019, Turkey's volume of arms exports increased by 86 percent. Between 2015 and 2019, it ranked on average as the world's 13th largest arms exporter. Turkey has exported significantly to 28 countries, as well as Syrian rebels (Béraud-Sudreau *et al.* 2020).

Turkey's involvement in the Syrian war contributes to an increased internal demand for the fledgling defense industry. Today, 60 percent of the aviation and defense inventory of the Turkish Armed Forces, mainly utilized in Syria, is produced domestically. Moreover, the party's political vision underlines the notion that becoming a regional power involves a solid defense industry (*2023 Political Vision,* 2013, cited in Bağcı, Kurç 2017). Recently, Erdogan celebrated the new crewless aerial vehicle by Baykar Savunma – a firm owned by the family of President Erdoğan's son-in-law, Selçuk Bayraktar – and by Turkish Aerospace Industries. After proudly sayingthat Turkey has risen to the world's top three in combat drone technology, he added: "It is essential that our national technologies contribute to the security of allied countries, but we make our decisions according to our strategic priorities" (Hürriyet Daily News 2021).

These developments reflect a radical transformation of the AKP's tumultuous relationship with the Turkish Army. The military, perceived as the guardian of the *secular* state, has enjoyed a privileged place in the political system not only with the threat of arms but also by creating a belief that it has been an indispensable requirement for the survival of the Turkish nation (Demirel 2004)[11]. The AKP has put "democratization" through political reforms as a central element of its hegemonic project and waged a political battle against the military's central role in Turkish politics (Bilgin 2007; Akca 2006). This political battle did not bring about further democratization nor a rupture in the deeply entrenched militaristic currents within the Turkish political culture (Altinay 2004). It restructured the military in line with the AKP's political ideology (Kingsley 2016) and strengthened a police-centered authoritarian state (Akça 2018). The AKP government used the Syrian war as an opportunity to prove the hitherto underestimated might and capabilities of "this police-centered state" in regional and domestic politics.

Syrian refugees have become another source of national pride in AKP's economic nationalism. The AKP and President Erdogan define Turkey's temporary protection regulation as a sign of "Turkish hospitality" and glorify Turkey's ref-

11. The Kurdish issue and *Irtica* (political Islam) have been the main enemies of the State by the Turkish Army in the last decades (Balta, Akça 2013).

ugee policy as the proof of the moral superiority of Turkey over the Western world, which has long turned a blind eye to the human costs of the Syrian war (Yanasmayan, Üstübici, Kasli 2019: 48). The AKP has quickly converted this human cost into an economic-benefit discourse that would eventually serve the national economy. In the heated debate over granting citizenship to the Syrians holding economic and intellectual capital, the AKP focused mainly on the "benefit" they would create for the Turkish economy (*BBC* 2017). In recent years, this discourse on "economic benefit" has become even more visible. Recently, Yasin Aktay, one of the chief advisors of Erdogan, stated that "investors and industrialists are delighted with the Syrians, and if you remove them from some significant workplaces, this country's economy will collapse" (*Cumhuriyet* 2021).

AKP's discourse on "economic benefit" contrasts with the anti-immigration populist discourses of the opposition parties. The Kemalist camp in Turkish politics adopted an anti-immigrant discourse emphasizing "economic welfare for nationals" and "sovereignty within national borders" and arguing that Syrians were treated with more "privilege" than Turkish citizens.[12] The chairman of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kilicdaroglu, has continuously made references to the scarce resources and their unjust allocation to the Syrians:

> The Minister of Work and Social Security states that they will grant work permits to 2 million Syrians in Turkey [...] We have 3 million unemployed people, our sons, and daughters... I am calling on our people's conscience. To whom shall we give priority? Why did these 2 million Syrians come here? Which foreign policies did cause them ending up here? (*AA* 2014)

From the start, the CHP opposed the interventionist foreign policies of the AKP, particularly Turkey's aggressive involvement in the Syrian war. Despite this critical stance, the CHP, along with the rest of the opposition parties in the parliament except the pro-Kurdish party, gave the green light to all military interventions in Syria by supporting AKP's proposal for the authorization of military force in Syria. The Turkish state's border policies regarding Syrian migrants are highly shaped by the long-lasting Kurdish question and the "state of violence" that has shaped the Middle East since the 1980s, particularly the violent policies of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria attempting to consolidate the Kurdish territories in their borders (Bozarslan 2014). Unified around the common threat of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, the Turkish parliament has repeatedly voted for military interven-

12. The argument of "economic partiality" (Clift, Woll 2012: 308), which is based on the preferential treatment of actors considered as "insiders" and open discrimination against "outsiders", is a dominant leitmotif for Turkish political parties in opposition.

tions in the last decade. As will be discussed in the following pages, the AKP justified these military operations in the eyes of the public and of opposition political parties as necessary steps for providing a safe zone to facilitate Syrians' repatriation. Currently, almost a quarter of the Syrian population lives in territories controlled by either Turkey or its proxies – such as the Idlib region in northwest Syria. Turkey attempts to keep Idlib as a "safe zone" controlled by regime opponents. (Adar *et al.* 2020) In the following section, I discuss the resonances of AKP's economic nationalist discourse on the Syrian war and refugees in Gaziantep's local politics.

The effects of the AKP's economic nationalism on local politics: The case of gaziantep

In the early 1980s, Gaziantep was an ordinary city in the southeast region of Turkey, which has connoted "underdevelopment" and "ethnic conflicts" throughout the history of Turkey. Within less than 20 years, the city has become an export giant in the region, producing textiles, food, chemicals, and plastic products in five huge industrial zones – the largest zones in the country. For local business elites, the success of Gaziantep lies in the local spirit of the city, which can be characterized by commercial aptitude, perseverance, and inclination towards cooperation (Yüksel 2014a). However, a critical examination of the city's recent history reveals that Gaziantep has made ample use of the conditions of wars in its environs. In the 1990s, the city attracted massive migration waves of Kurdish populations from neighboring cities due to the low-intensity war between the PKK and the Turkish state. Rural migrants fleeing from skirmishes in the rural areas constituted an informal, cheap labor force necessary for meteoric increases in manufacturing production. Moreover, Kurdish businesspeople who migrated to Gaziantep created the city's link to Iraqi Kurdistan – a new market for Turkish entrepreneurs after US intervention in the early 2000s. Gaziantep has recorded an increase of 200% in exports in 2004 compared to former years. The Iraqi market held the lion's share of the exports in the mid-2000s and is still the top export region in the city's local economy (Yüksel 2009, 2014b; *Degisim* 2019).

The local business circles of Gaziantep, known for their pragmatic approach to politics, have gradually developed close relations with the AKP government. AKP municipalities have governed the city since the early 2000s. In 2011, during his visit to the city, Erdogan thanked Gaziantep for its commercial success and political support:

> Eighty provinces in Turkey envy you. Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, Amman, Baghdad, Cairo envy you [...] On behalf of myself and my nation, I would like to thank you again for making each of us proud. Thank you for your common sense, tolerance, and hospitality. Thank you for producing, exporting, and making Turkey a developed country [...]. The people of Gaziantep have sided with us and have always been with us. [he refers to his political party] (2011, June 9, Gaziantep).

Due to its political alignment with the AKP government and the local activism of its business classes, Gaziantep has emerged in the region as an economic and political hub that controls the institutional channels of communication between the region (and even the country) and supranational and international actors, including the EU. In this sense, when the Syrian war started, Gaziantep was already in a leadership position in the region in the eyes of the central government and international and supranational institutions. The city responded quickly to "the Syrian crisis". In 2013, the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce (*Gaziantep Ticaret Odasi*, GTO) president stated that the Middle East was in chaos and that the people of Gaziantep should turn this negative situation into a positive one. The president referred to an opportunity to increase the volume of exports to Syria and to the small number of Syrian migrant entrepreneurs who were seen as an advantage in expanding the existing export volume.[13] In 2013, the Chamber organized a meeting and produced a "Common Wisdom Report". In this short booklet, the business circles determined the problem areas and suggested solutions. The main emphasis in the early report was on the informal working conditions of Syrians in the Gaziantep economy due to a lack of legal arrangements (Gaziantep Ortak Akıl Raporu 2013). During my visits to the city in 2013, businesspeople told me how they were lobbying in the capital city, Ankara, for the government to take steps for incorporating Syrians legally into the labor market. In 2014, government-regulated access to the labor market for Syrians under the Temporary Protection bylaw. However, bureaucratic hurdles left the regulation ineffective. In 2015, GTO prepared a second report. The 2015 report underlined that Syrians were not consumers in the urban economy, but also emphasized the surplus value they would create within urban economies and proposed a series of legal arrangements for their economic inclusion (İcimizdeki Suriye [Gaziantep Ortak Akıl Raporu-2] 2015).

13. In 2013, Gaziantep's exports to Syria increased by 400 %. Reasons for the export boom included the increasing need for humanitarian aid to Syria and the relatively safe border zones created by armed groups in Syria who were supported by Turkey (İcimizdeki Suriye [Gaziantep Ortak Akıl Raporu-2] 2015).

Syrian business associations in Turkey, such as the Syrian Economic Forum (SEF), also define themselves as successful entrepreneurs or buried treasures in local markets who would help the Turkish exporters to increase their exports to Syria or to the former Syrian export countries (Syrian Entrepreneurs: A Buried Treasure 2018). As the Syrian Business association president states, Turkish and Syrian businesspeople will together rebuild Syria once the war is over (Another Side to the Story: A Market Assessment of Syrian SMEs in Turkey 2017). The increasing presence of Syrian businesses in the city is seen as the background of the future collaborations. In 2020, GTO had 2387 firm members owned by Syrians compared to 272 in 2014 (GTO Faaliyet Raporu 2014 2014; GTO Faaliyet Raporu 2020 2020).

The AKP municipality has also worked as an effective agent in building Gaziantep's migration infrastructure. The mayor, Fatma Sahin, is a vigorous defender of granting legal rights to Syrians, particularly in the labor market. In 2016, in a panel organized by the municipality for NGOs, she highlighted the qualified workforce that Gaziantep had attracted:

> Last year, in Gaziantep, there were hundreds of Syrian doctors. They left for Scandinavian countries. We could not keep them here because we could not offer them legal rights and formal working conditions. We need to keep the qualified workforce in Gaziantep. Their presence harms nobody.

These positive narratives about the necessity of work permits and the elimination of informal working conditions contradict the actual working conditions in Turkey and Gaziantep. According to reports by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), in 2019, 34% of actively working Turkish citizens were not covered by any social security institution. In other words, more than 1/3 of the labor force was working informally (Erdogan 2020). In Gaziantep and its environs, this rate is even higher, around 40% in 2019 (TUIK). The Turkish government has revised the 2014-bylaw and issued a new regulation in 2016 that allowed Syrian workers to apply for a work permit. The application process is still complicated and poses many barriers.[14] Syrian firm owners also

14. Employers must apply for the work permit on behalf of the worker, pay a fee and prove they cannot find a Turkish citizen to fulfill the role. The employer must also submit tax reports, commit to paying at least the minimum wage, and pay the employee's social security benefits. In each workplace, employees under Temporary Protection must not constitute more than 10 percent of the workforce, though an exemption is possible. Those under Temporary Protection must wait for six months upon receiving this status before they can apply for a work permit. Work permits need to be renewed every year (Leghtas, Hollingsworth 2017). In 2020 the Ministry of Work and Social Security issued 132.497 work permits in Turkey. This number corresponds to 10% of the 1 million foreigners who

refer to many problems that hamper their business. Firm owners mention bureaucratic hurdles in renewing the business licenses, getting credits, opening bank accounts, bureaucratic hurdles in residence permit applications, limited quotas for Syrian workers, and yearly renewal of work contracts (Türkiye'deki Suriyeli İs İnsanlari ile Toplanti Raporu 2018). In contrast to AKP's discourse that defines the "integration of Syrians" as part of national pride, policies regulating the working conditions of Syrian immigrants are practically ineffective.

The discourse on returning Syrians has been a frequent theme in Gaziantep municipality's public discourse. In 2014, right after a series of mobs against Syrians, the mayor calmed down the anti-Syrian sentiments:

> The neighborhood is a sacred relationship in our beliefs. We are making massive efforts to sustain peace in our neighbor Syria and enable everyone to live on their land in peace. Our president [she refers to Erdogan] stated that he would work for … the regional peace. We want to secure a region in Syria in which our Syrian brothers can (go back) and live in peace (*Kirmizitaş* 2014).

In 2019, the mayor asked for the locals' patience in an interview. She estimated that half of the Syrian population in Gaziantep would be settled in the safe zone if Turkish military operations became successful (*FFM Online* 2019). In a TV show in 2020, the mayor repeated that Turkey's latest military intervention to Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield, was a turning point concerning the return of the Syrians: "After Operation Euphrates Shield, around 100.000 people returned to Jarabulus. About 400.000 people returned to Idlib. If this military pact with the USA succeeds, 1 million people will return to Syria".

Returning Syrians are part of the expansionist economic visions of the AKP. Fuat Oktay, the Deputy President, expects 1 million Syrians to return and live in areas rebuilt by the Turkish construction companies:

> Our draft plans regarding the structure of the safe zone include a settlement area of 140 villages with ten districts. We also plan to build around 200 thousand houses in the Operation Peace Spring region. Our plans include schools, hospitals, industrial sites, places of worship, green areas, roads, water, and electricity infrastructure […] Anyone who sincerely wants an end to the humanitarian crisis in Syria should take responsibility for the safe zone (*Burun, Kanli* 2019).

In the eyes of the local business circles, these military operations might benefit the local economy, as they did in the case of Iraq in the early 2000s. "Securiti-

hold a residence permit and can apply for a work permit (Erdogan 2020); around 90% of them work without employment contracts.

zation of the border zones" also has immediate effects on the local economy of Gaziantep. In a commentary, the then GTO president explains that the astronomical increase of exports to Syria in 2013 was due to changes in military power in the border zone: "when rebel groups seized control of border crossings on the Syrian side following Turkish military interventions, Turkish exports perked– mainly in cooking oil, flour, and flour products, cement, iron and steel, hygiene, and cleaning products, and automobiles" (*Degisim* 2019). In a meeting with International Labor Organization (ILO) and other local representatives, an expert working in the Gaziantep development agency (Ipekyolu Kalkinma Ajansi) offered the "Northern Iraq"solution to strengthen commercial ties with Syria: "Back then, the safe corridor in Northern Iraq served our commercial ties with Iraq [...]. All commercial commodities were transferred to the Northern Region and then distributed to the south. We can imagine a similar solution for the Syrian commerce: creating a safe zone on the border and using it as a supply zone" (ILO 2015). During the war, border trade, and humanitarian aid provided substantial economic relief for border cities like Gaziantep with the necessary industrial infrastructure. Today, Turkey is Syria's leading supplier and, together with China, accounts for more than half of Syria's imports (*Degisim* 2019).

Conflicting discourses: Challenges to AKP's economic nationalism

This seemingly tolerant discourse of the local administration and local business circles contrasts with negative discourses about Syrians that circulate in everyday conversations. During my stays in the city 2013 and 2015, there was already an emerging discontent against the Syrians and robust discourse on "the unfitting of Syrian culture" to the local culture of Gaziantep. Syrians "increasing rents," "invading the parks and pavements," "disrespecting the queues in hospitals," "being rude," "being disrespectful to the culture of Gaziantep by launching their businesses/restaurants everywhere," "stealing jobs by accepting to work for nothing," are all recurrent themes in everyday conversations. As Senoguz (2017: 167-8) demonstrates, the locals in Gaziantep draw boundaries between deserving and undeserving migrants, attempting to challenge the state's migration policy through a moral discourse.

The culmination of anti-Syrian hostility in the city was the riots against Syrians in Gaziantep in August 2014.[15] The riots took place after the news that

15. These attacks followed initial and small-scale mobs against Syrians in May 2014. Two dozen Syrians had to leave the city after angry Turkish crowds attacked their homes in May (Yalcin 2014).

a Syrian tenant allegedly killed his Turkish property owner due to a discussion over his family's eviction. Shortly after the murder, youth mobs in the city's working-class neighborhoods started physically attacking Syrians and vandalizing their cars and shops (Burun 2014a). The police forces took control of the mobs after three days, yet random attacks continued. During the following weeks, Syrians were compelled to remain in their houses for safety reasons (Senoguz 2017: 168). After the events, both the municipality and the governor called on citizens to be calm. Shortly after the mobs, the municipality initiated the replacement of Arabic signs in Syrian shops and restaurants with Turkish signs (*Cumhuriyet* 2014)[16] and devised an eviction plan for thousands of Syrian migrants from the city center to camps on the grounds of "unhealthy living conditions". This resulted in a wave of out-migration of Syrian migrants (*Burun* 2014b). The tension in the city's working-class neighborhoods stems from fierce competition in Gaziantep's informal economy. In a roundtable with NGOs working on Syrian migrants in 2015, officials from the local branch of the Turkish Employment Agency (ISKUR) complained that 17.000 Turkish workers lost their jobs, implying that Syrian workers working under informal conditions occupied these positions (Türkiye'de Suriye Akinina ILO'nun Yaniti Projesi 2015).

The local branches of the opposition political parties are important actors in challenging the AKP's economic discourse on the Syrian refugees. Local cadres of opposition parties echoed the moral repertoire of their party center in even harsher tones by defining Syrian refugees as an "economic burden" to corner the AKP for its economic and foreign policies. A few days before the mobs in 2014, the CHP MP of Gaziantep stated that the city could not handle the high number of Syrians: "Both Syrians and Gaziantep residents suffer from this issue. Syrians turn to begging or immoral jobs. Their labor is exploited. [...] We do not know where they stay or how they make a living" (Yalcin 2014). These discourses are still present. Recently, a CHP MP from Gaziantep, Akif Ekici, criticized AKP's argument on the Syrian's economic benefit to the Turkish economy: "Syrians who open small businesses employ Syrians. We do not need their employment. Our soldiers die while Syrians enjoy smoking

16. These Arabic signs continued to be a hot issue until 2019. When the Interior Minister stated that all Arabic signs should be replaced by Turkish ones, the shop owners articulated their discontent, arguing that the Arabic signs created unfair competition as Arab tourists as well as Syrian migrants preferred to shop from Syrian shops rather than the "local ones" (*Kam* 2019).

their water pipes" (*GaziantepPusula* 2021). Another CHP MP from Gaziantep accused AKP of insulting the Turkish nation and the city of Gaziantep:

> The government speaks as if the Turkish economy depends on the Syrians. These words are insults to our young people, industrialists, and our national industry... The EU puts Syrians on a salary to keep them in Turkey to protect their border security... A refugee game is played in our country (*Gaziantepgunes* 2021).

Conclusion

Economic nationalism is an ensemble of nation-framed discourses that work as "practical categories" (Brubaker 2010: 13). In this article I discussed how political actors in Turkey, mainly the AKP, use these practical categories to legitimize their acts and economic agendas. AKP's militarist-populist economic nationalism, which defines national interests based on military strength, regional leadership and expansion, and national survival against enemies within and outside, is deeply embedded in the economic and political dynamics of the Syrian war. These economic dynamics include economic interests of different segments and institutions in Turkish society – i.e., the politically realigned Turkish Army as the most significant arms producer, the new capitalist class growing under the wings of the government, local business circles of Gaziantep, local workers demanding the return of refugees. In AKP's expansionist economic nationalism, the human cost of the Syrian war is converted into "an allegedly economic benefit", and an opportunity to prove the hitherto underestimated might of the Turkish state in regional and domestic politics.

The case of Gaziantep illustrates both the transformative power and the limitations of AKP's economic nationalism. The welcoming discourses of the local municipality and local business associations that emphasize the economic benefits of the Syrian refugees for Gaziantep's economy and put their repatriation in the future as part of the protection policy reveal the power of AKP's economic nationalism in capturing local discourses. As Abdelal (Abdelal 2018: 24) states, there is no single economic nationalism, but various economic nationalisms. Compared to the welcoming narratives of the AKP and politically active business circles in Gaziantep, everyday life in the city is full of negative discourses about Syrians. Through a strong division of us/them and a repetitive theme of "economic partiality," opposition party representatives produce counter-economic nationalisms that strengthen the negative perceptions of Syrians by the locals. In these counter-discourses, the

human cost of the Syrian war is converted into an "allegedly political and economic cost" and a "burden that is put on the shoulders of the Turkish people" because of the wrongful policies of the AKP. The discourses by the AKP and the opposition parties re/define not only the desirable migrant but also redefine the cost of the Syrian war by creating novel bases for discrimination and exclusion in localities.

Gaziantep's case is also a fertile ground to discuss how economic nationalisms can be perpetuated through claims and practices of non-state actors – in this article, business elites. GTO's proactive political lobbying for work permits is an example of how demands from below may shape the economic policies of state actors, albeit in limited ways. However, a close inspection of the actual work conditions in Gaziantep reveals that Turkey's Temporary Protection Program is not as hospitable for the refugees as claimed by AKP's economic nationalism. Syrian refugees continue to constitute the backbone of the informal economy in Gaziantep, and in Turkey, helping to sustain the economic growth. The discourses on their repatriation are mainly embedded in an economic vision of the afterlife of the war, which is expected to bring further economic development via "rebuilding Syria".

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"Economic nationalisms" and the immediacy of war. Turkey's Syrian policy.
2022 | ANUAC. VOL. 11, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2022: 127-150.
ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-4932