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'A knife with two sides': naturalization and the ambivalent value of citizenship for Syrians in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Different legal citizenships and passports are associated with different sets of status, rights and identities. Through naturalization into a higher-value citizenship, former migrants can improve economic opportunities, transnational mobility, and ease relationships. Building on growing research that questions the migrant-citizen binary, this paper asks how citizenship matters in practice through an exploration of naturalization amongst displaced Syrians in Turkey. Drawing on qualitative research with Syrians, some of whom held temporary protection status while others had naturalized, the paper argues that the rights and status associated with Turkish citizenship are ambivalent, simultaneously beneficial and costly. Naturalization provided some economic and social rights and spatial mobility compared to temporary protection status. But Turkish citizenship also reinforced class-based distinctions and racial discrimination, and shaped new forms of exclusion: Syrians forewent certain mobility and economic strategies that they accessed as refugees. The paper argues to conceive naturalization as a technology of territorialization that fixes people onto a certain territory and forces migrants to make difficult choices when negotiating state practices of bordering and mobility control. Paying attention to the simultaneously mobilizing and territorializing effects of naturalization helps to question linear assumptions of citizenship and status hierarchies.

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Introduction

When migrants naturalize, they formally access a 'combination of status, rights, and identity' (Joppke 2007, 37) associated with legal citizenship in the contemporary system of nation-states. Growing research shows that both migrants and states use citizenship strategically (Harpaz and Mateos 2019; Joppke 2019). For example, states attract wealthy individuals through citizenship-by-investment schemes. Migrants use naturalization as one instrument to access material rights (Harpaz and

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Mateos 2019): to secure residence, increase the ability to travel, to lead family lives across borders, and access economic resources and benefits (Leitner and Ehrkamp 2006; Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2017; Harpaz 2019; Godin and Sigona 2022; Haller and Yanaşmayan 2024). Yet, naturalization decisions are complex, as citizens-to-be contend with oppressive bureaucracy (Haller and Yanaşmayan 2024), feelings of split state loyalties and identities (Sayad 2004), and wider consequences for social networks and families (Godin and Sigona 2022). Moreover, not all ctizenships are alike. It is especially naturalization into 'higher-tier nationalities' (Harpaz 2019, 897) that can compensate for a lack of rights through citizenship at birth. This view, however, still assumes a linear hierarchy of citizenship over other statuses that reinforces the imaginary of a clear-cut migrant-citizen binary. This obscures the role of race and class in accessing rights in practice, and how citizenship itself is an institution of social and mobility control that borders, fixes and 'territorializes' individuals in place (Malkki 1992; Anderson 2013; De Genova 2018; Sharma 2020). Both together indicate that a more nuanced view of the benefits, costs and choices might be necessary to understand naturalization as a social practice of negotiation between migrants and states.

This paper asks how citizenship matters in practice to naturalized and naturalizing migrants, through an exploration of the effects and outcomes of naturalization for Syrian refugees in Turkey. I build on qualitative research with Syrians in Istanbul in 2021, some of whom held temporary protection status while others were naturalized citizens of Turkey. I show that naturalization into higher-tier citizenship was an ambivalent experience that also produced new challenges. For Syrians with citizenship of Turkey, naturalization helped to avoid deportation and arbitrary state violence, and, for some at least, increased economic security. To access these benefits, however, some lost livelihood and mobility strategies that they adopted not *because of* their previous, highly precarious status. That is, naturalization contributed to territorial security for naturalized citizens, but also *territorialized* these new citizens, fixing them onto a territory not of their choice. In deciding where and how to live, Syrians made difficult choices whereby naturalization was not always the best option. The case of naturalized Syrians with citizenship of Turkey challenges received notions of naturalization as formal inclusion, and of the benefits of migrant naturalization as necessarily a better choice compared to both refugee status and irregularity. Instead, I suggest that naturalization can have ambivalent benefits and costs for refugees, including simultaneously facilitating and obstructing economic opportunities and spatial mobility, even with a higher-tier citizenship. Citizenship thus overlaps with local and global structures of race, class, and legal status that shape whether and how refugees access formal and equal rights, and whether and how they are able to travel. I argue to view naturalization as a tool of bordering and territorialization in which people are stuck to a certain territory that shapes their mobility in the global world order of nation-states.

The paper proceeds as follows: I first outline the debates on the value of citizenship for migrants, showing how current research has underappreciated naturalization's role in reinforcing conceptions of membership that draw artificial distinctions between migrants and citizens. I then describe citizenship and naturalization practices, and the situation of Syrian refugees, in Turkey, followed by a description of empirical methods. Finally, I discuss how Syrians understand the function of citizenship of Turkey as simultaneously

and ambivalently associated with rights and oppression within nation-state technologies of territorialization.

The differential value of citizenship and naturalization

Legal citizenship as membership in a nation-state, like any membership, is simultaneously an inclusionary and exclusionary institution (Bosniak 2006; Brubaker 1992). Citizenship provides, and restricts, a combination of 'status, rights and identity' (Joppke 2007). Legal status and passports supposedly confer secure access to national territory, as citizens are defined by their ability 'to move both within a particular space and across its borders' (Cresswell 2013, 110). In liberal democracies at least, citizens should also have access to a set of civil, political and social rights, such as freedom of speech, voting and minimum welfare (Marshall 1992). Citizenship is also connected to obligations such as paying taxes, military service or political participation (Bosniak 2006). However, enjoying rights in practice has always been stratified by gender, age, class, physical and mental ability, and especially race and racism (Bosniak 2006; de Noronha 2022). Moreover, wwhich national citizenship one holds defines social and economic life chances (Shachar 2009). Citizenship also constitutes 'a significant marker in the international system of population management' (Hindess 2000, 1496): Euroamerican citizens can legally travel almost anywhere, whereas most people need hard-to-get visas or resort to irregular mobility to cross borders. At the same time, second-class citizens are variously immobilized within a state territory, such as through police frisking, imprisonment or restrictions on homelessness, indicating the 'blurry boundaries' of the migrant-citizen binary (Anderson 2024; De Genova 2018).

Within this debate, naturalization has mostly been conceived of as a means of inclusion into the benefits of citizenship. The recent 'instrumental turn' in citizenship studies explores how both migrants and states make strategic use of the rights and legal status supposedly associated with citizenship (Joppke 2019). For many migrants-turning-citizens, the primary value of naturalization relates to status and associated mobility, that is, to secure their residence on a certain territory and avoid future deportation (Aptekar 2016; Nunn et al. 2016; Haller and Yanaşmayan 2024), to travel for economic opportunities (Birkvad 2019; Harpaz 2019), or to lead family lives across borders (Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2017; Godin and Sigona 2022). Other authors emphasize how migrants access social rights, including economic opportunities and welfare benefits (Finotelli, La Barbera, and Echeverría 2018), and equal treatment to other residents (Birkvad 2019). People with precarious status and refugees are more likely to naturalize, in part because they have nowhere to return to (de Hoon, Vink and Schmeets 2020).[1]

Critical studies have begun to highlight the complexities in migrant decision-making and interactions with the state. Migrants may decide *not to* naturalize despite formal eligibility because of past experiences with racism (Godin and Sigona 2022), frustrating interactions with the bureaucracy (Haller and Yanaşmayan 2024), and out of loyalty to the country of origin (Leitner and Ehrkamp 2006; Sayad 2004). Migrants' decision to naturalize are not only shaped by their relationship to the state of residence but also by their citizenship of origin. Thus, migrants may choose to naturalize only if citizenship "compensates" for a current lack of mobility or economic rights (Harpaz 2019). More

broadly, naturalisation and its expected benefits (or lack thereof) are embedded in the relationship between different states and their relative position in the global world order (Constable 2021).

Assumptions that migrants are usually better off after naturalization into higher-tier citizenship thus reproduce notions of a mutually exclusive binary between migrants and citizens that does not hold in reality (Gonzales and Sigona 2018) and creates a linear hierarchical relationship whereby 'having citizenship is better than not having citizenship' (Macklin 2015, 229). Both obscure how nation-state citizenship is at its core an institution of social and mobility control, not only of imagined outsiders but also of citizens, not least through the imposition of documentation or passports (Hindess 2000; Sharma 2020). Migrant naturalization thereby is also part of bordering practices that regulate the spatial and social mobility of migrants and citizens alike (De Genova 2018). Citizenship, in this view, is one technology of 'identifying, fixing and immobilizing individuals and populations' (de Noronha 2022, 433) in a broader discursive field of 'territorialization': the assumption that a person automatically belongs to a nation associated with a certain territory and can only access rights as an presumably immobile citizen (Malkki 1992; Sharma 2020).

This paper seeks to understand how current and former migrants negotiate this terrain of citizenship rights, bordering and territorialization. I view citizenship as a relational and ambivalent practice that may be simultaneously beneficial and costly, even in circumstances of highly unequal "passport value". Moreover, experiences of naturalization may be shaped not only by local inequalities based on class, racialization and gender, as highlighted by critical citizenship literature, but also by the broader availability and accessibility of resources, including those accessed through other legal statuses. While often citizenship provides greater security, rights and mobility, in some cases of highly unequal and stratified citizenship rights, precarious statuses may may come with alternative and flexible opportunities. By appreciating the nuanced experiences, strategies and often difficult choices of people with 'weaker passports', I argue for a more nuanced view of citizenship and naturalization as a simultaneously mobilising and territorialising institution that complicates the binary association of citizenship with rights and territorial security, and migrancy with exclusion and involuntary mobility. Before presenting my empirical material to illustrate this argument, I outline the processes and possibilities of migrant naturalization in Turkey, highlighting the special case of Syrians.

Citizenship and naturalization of Syrian refugees in Turkey

In Turkey, legal understandings of citizenship broadly reflect contestations of Turkish nationhood over the relative importance of republicanism and religious ethnonationalism (Yilmaz 2021). After the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1924, citizenship was part of the state-building project under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to promote a Turkish republican and national identity based on obligations towards the state and cultural dimensions such as militarism and masculinity (Keyman and Icduygu 2005). The constitution implies that anyone with a relation to Turkish territory could be considered a 'Turk' (Içduygu, Çolak, and Soyarik 1999); these republican understandings of citizenship ambiguously overlap with exclusionary and racialised nationalist imaginations of

Turkishness as rooted in ethnolinguistic Turkism and Sunni-Muslim Islam (Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2008; Yilmaz 2021). Both notions shape the legal framework for naturalization, as regulated in the Citizenship Law and the Settlement Law in various iterations. Through the Citizenship Law, naturalization can occur through marriage, through a regular pathway for immigrants based on residential and other requirements, and in exceptional circumstances. For the regular naturalization pathway, the parallel Settlement Law restricts who counts as an 'immigrant' to those with 'Turkish descent or culture' (Kadirbeyoglu 2007), broadly associated with Turkish ethnicity and Sunni-Muslim religion. As a result, throughout the twentieth-century immigrants thr majority of naturalized citizens were considered of Turkish descent, including about 1.6 million Tatars, Circassians and Bulgarians (Kirişçi 1996). Under the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), the possibility for exceptional citizenship has been expanded, including on discretionary grounds and through investment in property or businesses (Serdar 2023).

Syrian refugees in Turkey navigate this field of symbolic belonging and formal criteria for Turkish citizenship. Following Bashar Al-Assad's brutal crackdown on the Syrian revolution in 2011, about four million Syrians have registered for temporary protection status in Turkey. Temporary protection in theory provides protection from deportation and access to some social rights such as free primary healthcare and education (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2021). Syrians under temporary protection can also apply for the *kızılaykart* cash assistance, funded by the EU and distributed by the Turkish Red Crescent (Ark-Yıldırım and Smyrl 2021). The Presidency for Migration Management, the authority responsible for issuing registration documents, can refer temporary protection holders to UNHCR for resettlement to a third country.

Despite this bundle of social rights, temporary protection does not count as 'full' refugee status according to the 1951 Geneva Convention and has been termed a status of 'precarity' (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2021). While it is temporally indefinite, the status can be revoked by presidential decree at any time. Access to work permits relies on the goodwill of employers who more often hire Syrians as a cheap, informal and exploitable workforce (Ertorer 2021). Many struggle to access housing. Landlords often refuse to rent to Syrians and some municipalities have formally banned renting flat to foreigners (Ertorer 2021). Syrians under temporary protection are excluded from the broader social security systems of Turkey (Ark-Yıldırım and Smyrl 2021). Right to residence, healthcare and education are limited to the province of registration, or require re-registration which many governorates have stopped since 2018 (Şahin Mencütek et al. 2023). To travel to another province, temporary protection holders require state permission which is often delayed or rejected, even for short visits. As a result, Syrians who move to another province to find work, access education, or unite with family members live in *de facto* irregularity. If caught, they should be deported to the province of registration but refoulement back to Syria is common (Şahin Mencütek 2022). Syrians under temporary protection also risk losing their status if they leave Turkey. Syrian mobility is thus characterised by "precarious movement", both within and beyond Turkish territory (Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel 2021, 9).

Crucially, temporary protection status cannot be changed to a regular residence permit excluding Syrians from the regular pathway towards naturalization. However,

in 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that 'highly qualified' Syrians under temporary protection could be granted exceptional citizenship on a discretionary basis (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018). According to the Interior Ministry, Turkey has granted citizenship to about 238,000 Syrians by November 2023, the most recent announcement (BBC News Türkçe 2023).

No official policy states the conditions for exceptional citizenship for Syrians. According to public statements of President Erdoğan, select educated and qualified Syrians, such as teachers, doctors and engineers, would be granted citizenship if they could "contribute" and feel a sense of belonging to Turkey (Serdar 2023). Syrians are not expected to renounce Syrian nationality and hold dual citizenship in theory, although it is unclear whether the Syrian state will accept the return of dual nationals in future. The application process includes minimum eligibility criteria such as legal entry to Turkey, holding temporary protection status and a clean police record, but the process is shrouded in intransparency and discretion (Serdar 2023). Syrians cannot simply apply for naturalization. The practice appears to be that some Syrians under temporary protection receive an SMS from the Presidency for Migration Management and are invited to submit their application documents. After an indeterminate duration, interviews and security checks, some receive a Turkish ID card (*kimlik*) while others are rejected for unknown reasons. Syrians of Turkmen origin might be unofficially prioritized (Akyol 2022) but this too is unclear.

In line with public anxieties about Turkish national membership more broadly (Yilmaz 2021), a majority of the Turkish population views citizenship for Syrians critically (Erdoğan 2022). Concerns include Syrians competing with lower-class workers for jobs (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018), and posing a voting bloc in favour of the ruling Islamist AKP to the detriment of both nationalist and left-leaning or pro-Kurdish individuals (Güney 2022). Most Syrians with temporary protection, conversely, state that they would like to obtain Turkish citizenship, although the share has been decreasing in recent years (Erdoğan 2022). In research with Syrians who had not yet naturalized, participants stated that Turkish citizenship would help them feel safer on Turkish territory and enable a 'normal' life (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018), and access resources such as rented houses, the ability to travel, employment and wealth (Akyol 2022). The small number of studies directly engaging Syrians with citizenship of Turkey show that they struggle with accessing scholarships, getting free hospital treatment and often accept lower-skilled jobs (Cantürk 2020). Thus, "citizenship does not immediately guarantee inclusion in Turkish society, but is an ongoing process" (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018, 184). This highlights the need to explore more in-depth the differences and overlaps of temporary protection status, citizenship and rights associated with both.

Methodology

The empirical material draws on qualitative research conducted as part of a PhD project on the local politics of refugee settlement in Istanbul, Turkey and Frankfurt, Germany. The broader study investigated how migration governance, in particular temporary and insecure legal status, shapes how refugees build, maintain and envisage their social lives in the present and the future. For this, I conducted eight months of multisited qualitative fieldwork from May to December 2021: five in Frankfurt and three in Istanbul.

I conducted narrative interviews and participant observation with 30 displaced individuals: 15 Syrian, Afghan, Turkish and Iranian refugees in Frankfurt and 15 Syrians in Istanbul. All had fled their country of birth since 2011 but now held a variety of legal, mostly temporary statuses. Half were female. I also conducted 22 narrative interviews with neighbours of primary interlocutors, and 21 semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders working in refugee reception such as staff of the municipality and civil society organizations. Most interviews were conducted with individuals, except in three instances in Istanbul when interlocutors explicitly asked to be interviewed together with partners or friends. Interviews sought to understand experiences and challenges of settlement in the new state and neighbourhood, acquiring and renewing legal status, access to formal and informal support systems, and interactions and meaning of social relations with locals, family members and friends. During participant observation, I accompanied individuals in their everyday life and observed how social relations were practised amongst family members and in the neighbourhood.

This paper draws on the formal interview component with Syrians with and without citizenship of Turkey of the Istanbul section of the study. As I was interested in negotiations of temporary status, I did not initially focus on experiences of naturalization. However, in Turkey, naturalization emerged as a core topic of concern, both in interviews and informal conversations. Indeed, when asking interlocutors about other 'Syrian refugees' who might be interested in participating, these often turned out to also hold Turkish citizenship, opening questions of the validity of the refugee-citizen binary. I thus included questions on naturalization and citizenship in subsequent interviews, both with naturalized citizens and temporary protection holders. This allowed me to explore whether and how status made a difference to individuals. Below I refer to the perspectives of Syrians both with and without citizenship of Turkey.

Of 15 Syrian interviewees in Istanbul, eight had become naturalized citizens of Turkey. Three of these were Turkmen Syrians who spoke Turkish as a first language; all others were of Arab origin. Three were women. While I speak advanced Arabic, two early interviews in Arabic were supported by a translator; later, I conducted all interviews by myself in English (1) or Arabic (12). The interviews were transcribed and translated by a research assistant; all translations were double-checked by myself. Interviews were coded using NVivo 14 and analysed through memo writing and abductive reflexive thematic analysis that considers themes within the broader study, social and research context (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Interlocutors were recruited through snowball sampling with multiple entry points (Morgan 2008). In Frankfurt, I volunteered in two temporary refugee shelters and invited residents to participate in my study. Interlocutors in Istanbul were recruited via referral from participants in Frankfurt, through local civil society organizations, and previous research contacts. After the interviews, I asked interlocutors to suggest other participants who might be interested in the study. Potential interviewees were informed about the objectives of the research, use of research outputs, benefits and drawbacks, and withdrawal procedures via information sheets and a verbal explanation recorded on voice messenger. All interview participants signed a consent form. The research design was approved by the Ethical Review Committee of the University of Birmingham (ERN_20-1003). To ensure the confidentiality of interlocutors, I use the pseudonyms chosen by the participants

themselves. I have also changed some personal information, such as age, to minimize recognisability amongst other persons in their networks.

All interlocutors who received citizenship in Turkey continued to identify as Syrian and most were identified as such by others. This bears a question of how to refer to my interlocutors. There is no standard term for Syrians who have become naturalized citizens of Turkey. Amongst Syrians, 'naturalised/nationalised Syrian' (in Arabic: سوري مجنس/ *Suri mujanis*) is commonly used but this term is ambiguous in English, as it can also refer to naturalization into Syrian nationality. Other studies use 'Turkish citizens of Syrian origin' (Akçapar and Şimşek 2022; Cantürk 2020). In order to respect participants' self-identification, I tentatively and awkwardly use 'Syrian with citizenship of Turkey' which can be translated into Turkish (*Türkiye vatandaşı olan Suriyeliler*) and Arabic (سوري معه / مها الجنسية التركية *Suri m3ho/m3ha al-jinsiya al-turkiya*). I use 'citizenship of Turkey' as a translation of '*Türkiye vatandaşı*' and '*Türkiyeli*', as opposed to Turkish/'*Türk*' which in Turkish has ethnically exclusionary connotations. 'Syrian' is a shorthand for nationals of Syria, again a national(ist) construction with historical roots that can include people with a range of religious and ethnic/linguistic backgrounds.

I now turn to the discussion of meanings and strategic uses of citizenship amongst Syrians in Istanbul, arguing that citizenship provided rights and territorial security associated with status but these were associated with simultaneously mobilizing and immobilizing, deterritorializing and territorializing effects.

Citizenship as rights: racism and class

In the context of precarity described above, interlocutors argued that *de jure* Turkish citizenship provided greater access to economic and social rights, especially in terms of livelihoods, job opportunities and secure housing. Several naturalized interlocutors contended that they had improved bargaining power vis-à-vis employers, were less exposed to arbitrary treatment by landlords, and had achieved a sense of greater economic security. However, access to economic and social rights was qualified by experiences of racialization. Many interlocutors reported that they continued to be seen as exploitable 'Syrians' which limited their enjoyment of the theoretical economic and social benefits accessible to citizens. Similarly, experiences of racialization prevented equal access to the housing market as discrimination by landlords continued. Several interlocutors of Arab origin reported that in spite of their Turkish ID, landlords refused to let them as Syrian, because of their accent, name, ways of wearing the headscarf, or by their location of birth.

This was illustrated by Tania, a 32-year-old woman born in Damascus, who had naturalized five years earlier. She had previously worked as an English teacher in a Syrian private school and was now working as a freelancer in the NGO system. However, she was struggling to find a permanent post and continued to experience everyday discrimination as a Syrian.

> Citizenship gives you kind of a satisfaction feeling that I won't be kicked out of my house, just because the owner decided to. […] When I'm going to be hired or my job is going to end, I know that I'm going be treated somewhat fairly because I will be registered with insurance and everything. So this kind of created some kind of safety for me in that sense. […] It was a *knife with two sides* [i.e. a double-edged sword]. From one side, it helped [with getting

> a job]. But later, for most people, you will always be Syrian no matter what kind of identity [card] you have.

A similar story was related by Judy, in her 30s and originally from Aleppo, also a naturalized citizen of Turkey. She had been working as a teacher in a temporary education centre, a UN-run separate education system for Syrian refugee children that ran until 2016. After naturalizing, she applied for a job as an accountant, her original profession. As a Turkish citizen, she had hoped for better wages and formal employment with access to social security. However, she found that she was still treated differently:

> You know that when we as Syrians work anywhere, our wages are always lower. When I submitted a CV [to a company] and the procedures went through and [the boss] told me: OK, you will get 3000-3500. I said: excuse me!? What about health insurance? And he said: not right now. [I said:] Why not? *I am actually Turkish*! […] [But] he did not take [my citizenship] into consideration.

Once Judy received citizenship of Turkey her future employer still refused to hire her on equal grounds to her Turkish co-worker. Although she had the legal right to the insurance and equal pay as '*actually Turkish*', she was unable to claim this right because she remained Syrian in the eyes of the employer.

Conversely, Syrians of Turkmen origin who had grown up speaking Turkish at home were sometimes able to avoid ongoing racist discrimination because they were able to pass as fully Turkish (see e.g. Ginsberg 1996). While they spoke a different accent to the Istanbul one, they explained that most Turkish residents of Istanbul would think of them from the Eastern parts of Turkey. For example, Ghazal and Musa were both of Turkmen background from Damascus, Syria. They were able to naturalize because Ghazal had a Turkish grandmother. She explained that she and her family consciously hid their Syrian background from landlords and in everyday interactions to avoid the discrimination associated with it:

> We told [the owner] that we are Turks, not Syrians. If we tried to rent a home [as Syrian], they wouldn't agree to let a house to you, but if you say that you are Turkish, they will.

In addition to experiences of racism, the class position of Syrians with citizenship of Turkey shaped access to material and economic rights associated with Turkish citizenship. First, this occurred through access. Through President Erdoğan's reference to "highly qualified" individuals who could "contribute" to Turkey, naturalisation explicitly targeted higher-class Syrians (Akçapar and Şimşek 2018). However, the association between accessing naturalisation and class was not clear-cut. Not all higher-class Syrians appeared to receive invitations to naturalise, and amongst those invited many were rejected or never received a response. Conversely, some working-class Syrians also accessed citizenship, including amongst my interlocutors, potentially through the overlap of citizenship with ethnic prioritisation as Turkmen. A second relationship between class and naturalisation was how citizenship of Turkey opened up certain types of employment opportunities.

Higher-class individuals could use Turkish citizenship to access desirable white-collar jobs such as within NGOs, the UN and schools, especially for Syrians who spoke fluent Arabic, Turkish and English and could work as translators mediating between Syrian

refugee beneficiaries and the Turkish management (see also Nimer and Rottmann 2021). Formal employment and white-collar jobs were less accessible to working-class individuals, who remained in the large informal economy of Turkey.

At the same time, for some interlocutors, citizenship of Turkey was associated with *losing* economic and social rights accessed as temporary protection holders. Some argued that they had greater obligations towards the state as Turkish citizens, such as paying taxes and social security to access healthcare, both of which Syrians under temporary protection were exempt from. As Majed, a naturalised citizen of Turkey originally from Aleppo, explained:

> If I became unemployed now, I would have to pay for the hospital and I would have to pay off debt every month. Honestly, I think hospitals and taxes are [disadvantages of Turkish citizenship].

Just as many Syrian workers and business owners with temporary protection status choose to remain in the informal economy in order to retain a greater share of wages and profits (Akcali and Gormus 2021; Ertorer 2021), naturalisation was thus associated with losing access to previous economic strategies of navigating state obligations within informality.

Moreover, some lower-class interlocutors argued that they lost access to benefits accessible to Syrians under temporary protection, specifically the *kizilaykart*. For example, Ghazal and Musa had previously lived in Gaziantep in the Southeast of Turkey with temporary protection. When they were invited to apply for naturalization, they did so to be able to move to Istanbul to access better employment opportunities. In Istanbul, however, they were only able to find work in the informal sector. When they lost access to cash assistance after naturalizing, they experienced greater precarity, and their teenage son dropped out of school to work and support his family. Based on their experience, Ghazal's brother decided to forego naturalization.

> We were getting a lot of benefits before getting the Turkish citizenship. My son was at school, and although my husband was working, he was paying only for our food and this kind of stuff. [From the *kizilaykart*], we were able to pay our rent, electricity, and water services. We didn't buy anything else from that card, only to pay our rent and services. […] My brother was able to have [Turkish citizenship] but he wouldn't take it, because he couldn't afford living without the aid by the Turkish Red Crescent.

In short, for *some* Syrians in Istanbul, Turkish citizenship was associated with clear material benefits, such as greater economic opportunities and security of housing. However, both *de jure* and *de facto* access to social citizenship rights was qualified by the generally weak social security systems in Turkey, as well as racialization and class. Syrians with Turkish citizenship lost legal access to assistance available to refugees under temporary protection. Access to better jobs and housing in practice was conditional on passing as Turkish. In the context of welfare retrenchment, large informal sector, and widespread racism against Syrians (Şenses 2016; Şimşek 2021), naturalization had both instrumental benefits for economic and social rights but was also associated with negotiated drawbacks and ambivalent material economic effects.

Citizenship as status: security of territory and (im)mobility

As noted above, the mobility of Syrians under temporary protection is restricted in various ways, both within Turkey and beyond. Their immobility as temporary protection holders is compounded by the limited mobility rights afforded by Syrian citizenship. According to one index, the Syrian passport holds little "worth", allowing visa-free travel to 28 destinations and ranking 104th out of 105 states. In comparison, the Turkish passport grants visa-free access to 116 destinations, ranking 49th out of 105 states (Henley & Partners 2023). Indeed, many Syrians do not have a Syrian passport at all because of high renewal costs, delays of Syrian embassies due to paper shortages (Ghazi 2023), or refusal to interact with embassies run by the Assad regime (Ferreri 2022). Turkish citizenship thus potentially facilitates greater mobility compared to Syrian citizenship.

Unsurprisingly, many interlocutors highlighted how citizenship of Turkey afforded them greater freedom of movement, through protection from deportation, voluntary mobility *within* the state of Turkey, and international travel. As Majed described:

> At least, now I can travel between cities without permission. […] if my brother wants to visit me here in Istanbul and the police caught him, they will send him to jail for 4 to 5 days, then they will send him back to [another province]

Greater mobility across province borders also meant less exposure to arbitrary treatment by the police and government officials and contributed to a degree of safety. For example, Walee, 26, Turkmen, and working for a Turkish NGO, recounted that he once witnessed a crime and was summoned for a statement at a police station. Although he was not directly implicated, he was afraid of his encounter with the police. When he received citizenship he felt much safer:

> Direct deportation, I mean they could have deported me at that time. […] Citizenship gave me more restfulness in life overall, from a legal point of view, and from a safety point of view

In addition to mobility within Turkey, the Turkish passport also enabled certain forms of cross-border travelling. Loay, a 26-year-old born in Deir Az-Zor, Syria, went to Georgia on holidays as soon as he had Turkish citizenship, Georgia being one of the countries where Turkish citizens did not need a visa. He was also planning to travel to Jerusalem to visit Palestinian relatives and see the Dome of the Rock, an important site in Islamic belief.

For others, however, even with a Turkish passport, international travel remained out of reach. Some argued that they remained Syrian, and thus second-class citizens, in the eyes of visa-issuing embassies. When several interlocutors tried to apply for visas to visit relatives abroad, they were rejected, in their view not as Turkish citizens but as 'Syrians who became Turkish'.

> Since I'm a Syrian who became Turkish, [the embassies] are not accepting [my application]. Because they are so afraid that I might ask for asylum (Tania, 32)

While they knew that they would hardly get a visa to the EU with a Syrian passport, they tried to apply as *Turkish citizens* but felt they were still rejected *as Syrians*. Whether this is true or not is difficult to determine – EU visas by non-Syrian Turkish citizens are also frequently rejected (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs 2024). The

point is that structural discrimination did not end upon formal inclusion and was experienced as simultaneously mobilizing and immobilizing.

Additionally, the Turkish passport rendered mobility strategies more difficult that Syrians had access to *as refugees*. For example, Turkish citizenship would prevent Syrians from filing applications for resettlement to a third country such as the EU or the USA, as some interlocutors with temporary protection argued. Ameena, a 48-year-old Syrian under temporary protection was living in Istanbul with her husband and four teenage children. Her 17-year-old son had a neurological condition and was unable to find adequate treatment in Turkey. As a result, her family had applied for resettlement through the Turkish Presidency for Migration Management and UNHCR. She was confident about the outcome as two of her sisters had resettled to Europe (one from Turkey to Sweden, the other one from Lebanon to Germany). For her, citizenship of Turkey was associated with the inability to travel and immobility:

> I don't like this citizenship and I don't want citizenship. I want them to give me [the opportunity to] travel and that they take me abroad, so my son gets treatment.

If she was invited to apply for Turkish citizenship, Ameena was worried that she would no longer qualify for refugee resettlement and would not be able to get treatment for her son abroad. Despite the greater 'power' of the Turkish passport, it would foreclose resettlement, a mobility strategy that relied upon her family staying refugees.

These immobilizing effects of Turkish citizenship was again compounded by ongoing racist discrimination as Syrians. While the Turkish passport would allow interlocutors to stay in Turkey, very few interlocutors intended to do so, independent of whether they held Turkish citizenship or temporary protection. Indeed, the continued discrimination of Syrians, even with citizenship of Turkey, had psychological effects on all Syrians. Thus, Walee, in a joint interview with two friends who held temporary protection, nodded along when his friend Mahmood, a Kurdish-Syrian with temporary protection, summarized:

> No matter how much you develop yourself, no matter how much you achieved, you will be seen as 'Syrian'. Even when you take citizenship, you are Syrian. I mean, this is the thing that affects those Syrians who are leaving Turkey to other countries. Because of this pressure, the psychological pressure.

While citizenship in Turkey was associated with freedom of mobility both within and outside of Turkey for some, interlocutors' ongoing treatment *as Syrians*, associated with racist discrimination, left this potential mobility with a bitter aftertaste, and a strong sense of exclusion.

As a consequence, some interlocutors were making plans to leave via irregular means, including those with Turkish passports. However, again the Turkish passport both enabled and hindered mobility strategies. Interlocutors highlighted that they would struggle to be granted asylum in a European country as Turkish passport holders. In Germany, for example, where many interlocutors had family, a majority of asylum applications of applicants with Turkish citizenship are rejected whereas almost all Syrian citizens are granted international protection (BAMF 2023). Once in a preferred country of asylum, naturalized Syrians with citizenship of Turkey would thus have to decide whether to apply as Turkish citizens, albeit of Syrian origin, or obscuring their

Turkish citizenship and apply as Syrians, in both cases risking uncertainty, rejection and eventual deportation. Tania explained the situation as follows:

> Everybody I know is thinking about leaving Turkey, even my Turkish friends. But they have advantages. Because for example, they will go and they will apply as a Turkish [person] and maybe for them, they can even be [regular] immigrants […] One person gave me this idea once: "just go to Germany and tell them that you have a problem and go as an asylum seeker there. Like, they will take you." But now I'm a mix of everything that is not combining in any possible way so […] *I'm stuck*.

For Tania, being *both* Syrian and Turkish did not 'combine in any possible way'. She was both, and at the same time, she was neither. For her, the situation of Syrians with citizenship of Turkey was inherently ambivalent and characterized by 'stuckedness', combining spatial and existential immobility that many migrants and marginalized persons across the world experience (Hage 2015, 4). While Turkish citizenship protected her from deportation to Syria, Tania now felt stuck in other ways, both existentially and as if she was physically stuck onto Turkish territory, with fewer opportunities to leave. She and others struggled to travel on the same terms as Turkish citizens and also could no longer access mobility strategies they had used as refugees.

Discussion/conclusion

This paper contributes to the literature on the value of citizenship through an exploration of how Syrians with citizenship of Turkey experienced the outcomes of their naturalization process. Syrians in Turkey used citizenship to access economic and social rights, in particular, to move to provinces with better economic opportunities or to access white-collar jobs. However, *de facto* access to these rights was qualified by class-based differences within the group of Syrians, and experiences of racism vis-à-vis the dominant Turkish population - similar to differential experiences of discrimination amongst Syrians under temporary protection more broadly (Şimşek 2021). Higher-class Syrians with citizenship of Turkey who had prior capital and education could benefit from greater economic security. For lower-class Syrians, naturalization came with trade-offs: they had greater financial obligations and lost access to resources available to them as refugees, including exemption from tax and insurance payments and humanitarian assistance. Similarly, ongoing experiences of racist discrimination as Syrians by employers and others meant that citizenship on equal terms remained a "fantasy" (Anderson 2024).

Second, citizenship of Turkey also shaped the spatial mobility of Syrians. Compared to temporary protection status, citizenship of Turkey was a 'defensive strategy' (Godin and Sigona 2022, 1142): They were able to reduce arbitrary detention and deportation, either within Turkey or to Syria. They could also access previously closed forms of international travel. Nevertheless, upon naturalization, the limits to citizenship became more visible. Ongoing everyday forms of discrimination *as Syrians* were independent of legal status. Syrians with temporary protection were, by definition, temporary on Turkish territory and expected to leave in the future, either through informal means or official resettlement programmes. Conversely, Syrians with citizenship of Turkey *could* legally stay on Turkish territory but they also felt they *had to stay* whether they wanted to or not. For some, this created not only a sense of *existential* 'stuckedness' (Hage 2015) but also *spatial*

stuckedness by limiting alternative mobility strategies that Syrians accessed *as refugees* such as resettlement and applying for asylum elsewhere.

The case of Syrians with citizenship of Turkey shows that legal citizenship did not necessarily translate into rights in practice. Instead, rights were qualified and conditional on class and being read as Turkish in a context of high levels of racist discrimination. While some research on Syrians in Turkey has argued that higher-class Syrians are largely protected from racist discrimination (Şimşek 2021), my study argues that legal status overlaps with inequalities based on race and class in ambivalent and complex ways (see also Gonzales and Sigona 2018; Nimer and Rottman 2021).

More broadly, I contribute to the critical literature on citizenship as a global regime of population and mobility control (Hindess 2000; Sharma 2020). I argue that the case of Syrians with citizenship of Turkey questions narratives of a clear and linear hierarchy between citizenship and other forms of status. Although citizenship in Turkey provided access to some equal economic and social rights in theory, the high degree of racist discrimination as Syrians means that it was simultaneously experienced as a loss of economic and social opportunities associated with the otherwise highly precarious temporary protection status, including free healthcare and avoiding tax payments. Greater mobility across and within the borders of Turkey coincided with the closing down of irregular and humanitarian mobility strategies in a context where Syrians felt that they could not stay in Turkey. This ambivalent effect on mobility was not only shaped by the relative value of Syrian and Turkish citizenship. It was also influenced by their respective position in the global citizenship regime: the Turkish passport provided relatively greater mobility rights but was not at the very top of the global citizenship hierarchy. As a result, Syrians experienced the rights and status associated with Turkish citizenship as simultaneously mobilizing and immobilizing in spatial, social and economic terms.

Instead of assuming a clear and linear hierarchy between citizenship and other statuses, I argue to pay closer attention to the complex and nuanced decisions that migrants make when naturalizing, including difficult choices between deportability, on the one hand, and ambivalent restrictions of mobility and opportunities, on the other. Citizenship, in Turkey and elsewhere, should be seen as an ambivalent institution of *both* status and rights *and* of social and mobility control, or in the words of one interlocutor, a 'knife with two sides' that cuts both ways. In this context, I argue to conceive of naturalization as a technology of territorialization, understood as state practices that perform territorial sovereignty and reinforce the idea that persons should only have rights as citizens of nation-states (Malkki 1992; Sharma 2020; de Noronha 2022). Conceiving naturalization as territorialization, simultaneously mobilizing and immobilizing, can help contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the hierarchical relationship between different citizenships, migrancy and irregularity. While Syrians and other migrants have little choice to naturalize to escape the precarity of temporary status and avoid the violence of deportation, they also invite deeper questions as to whether the status of legal citizenship is the only means to achieving rights on equal terms.

Note

1. Pragmatic and strategic considerations of citizenship and naturalisation are affectively and emotionally embedded, as migrants develop a sense of identity with and expectation of

recognition and equality in the new nation-state (Leitner and Ehrkamp 2006; Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2018; Birkvad 2019). Here, I focus on the material effects of legal citizenship, less on how citizenship shaped questions of affective belonging.

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