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Syriana Non Grata: Representation of Syrians in Turkish Humorous Magazines

ABSTRACT
This article examines representations of Syrian refugees in Turkish humorous magazines through close readings of three caricatures published between 2013 and 2024. Drawing on social semiotics and Žižek's (1993) concept of the "national Thing", it argues that caricatures depict Syrians not only as cultural outsiders but also as figures implicated in the perceived loss of enjoyment, mobility, and economic security among Turkish citizens. Through close readings organised around integration, exclusion, and leisure, the study shows how satirical media both register and unsettle everyday nationalist anxieties. It positions caricature as a primary site for interpreting the affective and ideological grammar of migration discourse in Türkiye.

KEYWORDS
Syrian refugees; political caricature; Turkish satire; nationalism; enjoyment; migration discourse

1. Introduction

Türkiye's satirical press culture reaches back to the period of Ottoman modernisation. Aside from *Zvarcakhos* (Joker), published in Armenian and Armeno-Turkish in Armenian script in 1856 (Kiraz, 2024), the first Turkish humorous magazine to feature caricatures is *Diyojen* (Diogenes)[1], founded in 1870 by journalist and novelist Theodor Kasap, who was educated in Istanbul and Paris. The magazine's manifesto was Diogenes' famed retort to Alexander the Great: "Stand a little less between me and the sun". It directly appealed to the Ottoman government for an uncensored press (Koçak, 2016, p. 179). Since then, humorous magazines have remained one of the primary venues for articulating public opinion. These periodicals mirror the political climate and material conditions of their moment, each marked by distinct cultural allusions that illuminate the dynamics of Türkiye's political humour (Ünan Göktan, 2024, p. 98).

In the Turkish context examined here, a humorous magazine is a periodical that combines satire, caricatures, comic strips, and commentary on political, social, and cultural questions. Weekly and biweekly titles typically run to sixteen pages in any

[1] Translations from Turkish into English appear in the text are mine unless otherwise stated.

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printed format, while monthly or irregularly published titles run to forty-eight or sixty-four pages in standard or large formats. The corpus of this article consists of three caricatures published in *Uykusuz* (Sleepless) and *Naber* (What's Up), both of which remain in print and are among the most established humorous magazines in Türkiye. They inherit the legacy of the *Gırgır* (Wisecrack) tradition, which achieved a circulation in the millions in the 1970s. These magazines proliferate through successive splits, with each new magazine emerging from the institutional and aesthetic core of its predecessors. Founded by former contributors to *Penguen* (Penguin), *Uykusuz* debuted on September 5, 2007, and maintained a weekly publication schedule until its 801st issue on January 25, 2023. After a pause, the magazine reappeared in January 2024 with two seasonal issues and has been published monthly since September 2024. In 2015, Umut Sarıkaya left *Uykusuz*, which was still actively published at the time, and founded *Naber* as a largely solo project, supported intermittently by minor contributions from other artists. Despite initially announcing a quarterly schedule, *Naber* has followed an irregular publication pattern, producing only sixteen issues over the course of a decade.

This article critically examines the representation of Syrian migration in caricatures. The UNHCR's Annual Results Report records that in 2024, Türkiye remained host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world, as it had for nearly a decade. As of the end of 2024, 2,901,478 Syrian people were receiving temporary protection (UNHCR Annual Results Reports, 2025, p. 4). Data released by the Directorate General of Migration Management under the Turkish Ministry of the Interior show that the number of Syrians under temporary protection had declined to 2,353,402 as of December 25, 2025. The same data indicate that the number of Syrians under temporary protection was recorded as 0 in 2011; 14,237 in 2012; 224,655 in 2013; 1,519,286 in 2014; 2,503,549 in 2015; 2,834,441 in 2016; 3,426,786 in 2017; 3,623,192 in 2018; 3,576,370 in 2019; 3,641,370 in 2020; 3,737,369 in 2021; 3,535,898 in 2022; 3,214,780 in 2023; and 2,901,478 in 2024 (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2025). These figures help account for why, from 2013 onwards, Syrian displacement became one of the most contested issues in Turkish public debate. Following the Assad regime's violent suppression of protest demonstrations in March 2011, the ensuing unrest escalated into civil war and culminated in the overthrow of Assad in December 2024. Taken together, these figures establish Türkiye as the principal destination of Syrian refuge over the period. Initially received in humanitarian terms by a broadly welcoming public, Syrian refugees were progressively recast in the register of security. Public discourse came to link them with crime, economic strain, perceived cultural threat, and internal security (Koca, 2016, p. 56).

Between 2013 and 2025 Syrians featured prominently and repeatedly in Turkish print media, and this pattern has attracted considerable academic attention. Few studies, however, have examined the depiction of Syrians in caricatures

published in Türkiye. In the early stages of the unrest in Syria, the report titled "Understanding the Syrian Problem through Comics – 8", published in April 2012 by the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), argues that "one of the tools that most effectively reflects the so-called media war and how Middle Eastern public opinion perceives the Syrian issue is the cartoons published in the region's print media". On this basis, the report seeks to analyse the situation through caricatures from various Middle Eastern countries (Tanrıverdi, 2012). Yumurtacı and Tosunay's (2018) article, "The Representation of Migration in Humor Magazines", analyses how migration was represented in 2017 issues of *Leman* and *Uykusuz*, two of the most widely circulated humour magazines in Türkiye. Leman ran 25 migration caricatures in 2017 versus Uykusuz's three, suggesting a more explicitly political and oppositional orientation. Dilmaç and Kocadal's (2018) study, "Syrian Refugees in Turkish Cartoons: A Social Semiotic Analysis", analyses a corpus of 23 caricatures that appeared between 2013 and 2017 in *Uykusuz, Penguen, Gırgır*, and *Leman*. The primary conclusion of the study is that Turkish cartoonists portray Syrian refugees through a multifaceted and frequently distressing lens, mirroring and influencing public apprehensions. The caricatures persistently critique the Turkish government's "open-door" policy, depicting it as hypocritical and politically driven. Two contrasting depictions of refugees emerge: they are perceived either as an 'alterity' that jeopardises national stability and secular identity, or as 'our own kind' to be assimilated for the political advantage of the ruling party.

The arrival of Syrians in Türkiye since 2012 has generated a substantial body of caricatures, which has not yet received sustained academic analysis. This study addresses that gap by closely reading three caricatures from different periods to show how Syrians are portrayed as fragmentary or unintegrated members of society, foregrounding the social and cultural tensions through which they are imagined as a threat to Turkish national identity and everyday life.

2. *Syriana Non Grata*: three case studies

Before turning to the case studies, two concepts from Slavoj *Žižek*'s account of nationalism deserve specification, since they organise the readings that follow. The first is the "national Thing". For *Žižek* (1993), the Thing is not any actual feature of a national way of life – not a cuisine, a landscape, a language – but the fantasised substance that gives those features their density. It is what citizens point to when they say their nation has something other nations lack, while remaining unable to specify what that something is. The Thing's mode of existence is reflexive belief: individuals believe in it insofar as they suppose that others do (pp. 201–202). Crucially, the Thing is always experienced as already endangered. It is the 'threatened' form of enjoyment that gives the nation its affective consistency; a national Thing that no one could imagine losing would cease to function as one.

The second concept, the "theft of enjoyment", names the structural complement of this first one. If the Thing is constituted in the mode of threatened loss, it requires a figure to whom the loss can be attributed. The migrant, the foreigner, the visible Other typically occupies this position: not because the migrant has actually appropriated anything, but because the fantasy of the Thing demands a thief in order to remain coherent. The migrant must be imagined as enjoying – illicitly, excessively, in ways the citizen cannot – so that the citizen's own dissatisfaction can be experienced as a wrong rather than as a structural condition (*Žižek*, 1993, pp. 202–206). The accusation is not really about what the migrant does; it is about what the citizen needs the migrant to be doing.

The three caricatures examined below stage precisely this fantasy across three registers, and each, read carefully, exposes its internal contradiction. Figure 1 locates the theft in the marketplace and the social bond, and exposes the citizen-host as the one actually running the hustle. Figure 2 locates it in the domestic interior and the class position, and exposes the metropolitan onlooker as enjoying a comfort she cannot acknowledge, depending on the refugee's invisibility. Figure 3 locates it in leisure and movement, and exposes the citizen as immobilised not by the refugee but by the structural conditions the refugee is asked to symbolise. In each case, the satirical work consists in showing that the figure imagined as having stolen national enjoyment is the one most visibly without it.

Figure 1: Syrian Habibi (Üstün, 2013, p. 8)

Published in *Uykusuz* on 24 October 2013 – the year of the sharpest year-on-year increase in the Syrian population – the caricature below registers an early stage of the debate over Syrian integration into Turkish society.

The caricature depicts two characters engaged in conversation in Turkish near the seaside. The well-dressed, middle-aged man who addresses the other as “El Habibi” [my darling] is shown holding perfume boxes. In urban settings, particularly in Istanbul, it is common to encounter street vendors who claim to sell ‘original’ perfumes, typically targeting Arab tourists, whose presence increased markedly in 2013. The figure dressed in traditional Arab attire, who is addressed with the Arabic term “El Habibi”, reacts sharply to this form of address, responding: “Hey, get lost! Every two steps it’s ‘El Habibi, El Habibi’! You’re trying to push your cheap perfumes on me! I’m Syrian, man – I’m one of you now… Don’t lump us together with those trashy Arab tourists”. The Turkish vendor replies, “Why are you getting so worked up?” to which the Syrian responds, “Watch yourself”.

The cartoon stages a specific conflict, and naming it precisely is the first step in reading it. The conflict is not between Turkish citizen and Syrian refugee in any general sense; it is between two parties who recognise each other as commercial actors in the same informal economy, and who disagree about which of them is in the position of the dupe. The Turkish vendor’s hustle – the inflated street perfume, the appellation “El Habibi” deployed as a sales technique – is a small, banal extraction practised on Arab visitors. In Žižek’s terms, it is the disavowed jouissance of the host: an everyday enjoyment that the citizen practises without acknowledging, because acknowledging it would compromise his sense of himself as the wronged party. The refugee’s intervention (“You’re trying to push your cheap perfumes on me”) does not contest the hustle as such; it withdraws from it. By refusing the position of the marketable Arab tourist and naming the transaction for what it is, the refugee returns to the host an unwelcome reflection: the host’s own minor predation, made visible. The discomfort the cartoon registers – and the source of its uneasy humour – lies precisely here. The xenophobic complaint that frames everyday discussion (“they have come and taken from us”) is, in this scene, exactly inverted: the citizen is the one practising the small theft, and what he loses when the refugee speaks is the cover under which the theft was previously running.

The cartoon also depends on, and partly exposes, a stereotype that organises Turkish public discourse about the wider Arab world: the hierarchy between the desirable Gulf visitor and the undesirable Levantine refugee. The affluent Syrian in Western dress rejects the address “El Habibi” not by claiming Turkish identity but by repudiating a class position – “don’t lump us together with those trashy Arab tourists”. The line works as comedy because it mobilises a stratification that ordinarily operates beneath the threshold of articulation: the implicit “good Arab / bad Arab” distinction by which the figure of the Arab is sorted, on the markers of capital and comportment, into the welcome and the unwelcome. The cartoon’s

politics are sharper than they first appear. It does not endorse this hierarchy; it lets the refugee voice it, and in doing so, makes its operation legible to the reader. The Syrian who insists “I am one of you now” is laying claim to the same stratifying logic the host uses, and the host – the cheap-perfume vendor – has no grounds on which to refuse the claim except the one that the comedy will not let him voice. The Žižekian point is that the host’s national Thing, in the moment of the encounter, fails to deliver: it cannot supply a stable difference between “us” and “the trashy Arab tourists” that the refugee, who has learnt the local idiom of distinction, cannot also operate. Read in the conjuncture of 2013 – the year of the steepest rise in the Syrian population and of the first sustained public debate over their status – the cartoon already registers what later years would intensify: that the affective shift from “guest” to “problem” turns less on the refugee’s arrival than on his demonstrated capacity to refuse the terms of his hosting (Doğanay & Keneş, 2016, p. 154; Koca, 2016, p. 56; Ozduzen et al., 2021, p. 3351).

The caricature to be examined next likewise engages with the issue of Syrian integration, though it shifts focus from the figure of the affluent Syrian to the more commonly encountered image within Turkish society: the Syrian beggar.

Figure 2: Syrian Beggar (Dilek, 2014, p. 8)

An adult male beggar is depicted sitting on a handkerchief spread on the ground, with scattered coins beside a piece of paper bearing the inscription “I am Syrian”. In the foreground, two fashionably dressed women comment on the scene; one remarks, “I wish they wouldn’t come to our country”, while the other responds, “Ugh,

seriously", signalling her agreement. The Syrian beggar, portrayed as sufficiently integrated to comprehend Turkish fluently, voices an internal monologue: "As if I enjoyed leaving my centrally heated, fully furnished home just to sit on a stone here, for fuck's sake. The war broke out, so we came, unbelievable!"

The cartoon's conflict is over recognition, structured by an asymmetry that the reader sees but the diegetic figures do not. The two women see a beggar – a category they already know how to dismiss. The reader sees a man whose interior monologue uses Turkish middle-class vocabulary with native fluency: not just kombi (a natural-gas boiler standard in Turkish urban apartments) but oturma grubu (the matched living-room suite that signifies settled bourgeois domesticity), and a register of complaint ("just to sit on a stone here, for fuck's sake") that mimics, almost exactly, the rhetorical idiom of the women looking down at him. The cartoon's mechanism is the Barthesian one of textual anchorage (Barthes, 1977, p. 40): the women's speech anchors the visible image as a scene of nuisance, while the refugee's interior speech anchors the same image, for the reader, as a scene of class displacement. The conflict, in other words, is not staged between the women and the beggar at all – the women do not hear what he is thinking, and the cartoon does not let them. The conflict is staged for the reader, between the two readings of the same body. What is at stake is who counts as a fellow class subject and on what terms; the comedy and the pathos lie in the cartoon's refusal to resolve this in either direction.

The cartoon's stereotype both mobilises and exposes is gendered and classed in ways that warrant precise naming. The two women are not generic Turks: they are coded as metropolitan, fashionable, secular, consuming – the figure that Turkish media discourse has long mobilised as the bearer of a particular national respectability, the one whose comfort and composure the migrant is imagined to disturb. Recent scholarship on anti-Syrian discourse online has traced exactly this gendered, leisure-coded register, in which Syrian presence is figured as an offence against a feminine-coded middle-class equilibrium (Ozduzen et al., 2021, p. 3363). The cartoon makes the operation of that figuration visible in a single frame: the women's "I wish they wouldn't come to our country" is not the speech of overt nationalism but of casual proprietary entitlement – banal nationalism in the sense Billig (1995, p. 88) describes, in which the part claims to represent the whole without needing to argue for the representation. The cartoon's satirical edge is that it stages this entitlement at the moment of its blindness. The women's confidence in their position depends on the refugee remaining the category they take him to be; the cartoon shows, in his unspoken Turkish, that he is not.

The Žižekian work the cartoon does is to locate the "theft of enjoyment" inside this asymmetry of recognition. What the women possess and feel threatened by in the refugee's presence is not material wealth – they are walking past, not enjoying anything in particular – but the imagined exclusivity of the Turkish middle-class

life-world: the fantasy that the kombi-heated apartment and the matched seating suite are markers of a national way of life to which they belong and the beggar does not. The cartoon's reversal is twofold. First, it shows that the refugee has, before his displacement, lived inside the same imagined interior; he is not the figure outside the national Thing but the figure who has already possessed and lost it, and who can describe it in the host's own metonyms. Second, it shows that the women's enjoyment of their position depends on his not being able to do so. If the refugee can speak the language of kombi and oturma grubu, the national Thing fails to identify its own – the women's casual claim on the country ("our country") cannot survive the recognition that the beggar at their feet is a class peer. The fantasy that the refugee has stolen something has, in this cartoon, the structure Žižek (1993) describes most precisely: it is a fantasy whose function is to protect the citizen from noticing that what she fears the refugee has taken is something she herself cannot define, secure, or articulate without his collusion in the very category that the cartoon refuses to let him stay inside.

The caricature below was published in 2024 in issue 13 of *Naber*, a magazine produced single-handedly by Umut Sarıkaya.

Figure 3: Throwing the Greeks into the Sea, Keeping the Syrians out of It (Sarıkaya, 2024, p. 2)

Set against a stylised yellow map of Türkiye, drawn as if sun-bleached, including the northern half of Cyprus marked as Turkish territory ("our side") alongside the southern coasts and the Aegean Sea and faintly including the Marmara Sea and the Black Sea at the top, the image features six figures. At the centre of the image stands a character who repeatedly turns his head from side to side. While taking a drag from his cigarette and flicking off the ash, he says: "Summer is coming…

The Syrians will go into the sea again… They're going to get on my nerves! I'm already at the end of my tether; once they take off their tops, I'll jump on them. And you, don't hang around under my feet!" As he speaks, he kicks a figure on the left side of the image who is dressed in traditional Greek military attire; as the figure falls into the Aegean Sea, he exclaims "Kifidis", (a Greek surname that either marks the character as Greek or functions as a generic ethnic signifier despite being the first Turkish orthopaedic products company). To the left of the Taurus Mountains stands a figure dressed for the beach – shorts, a shirt, flip-flops, and a side bag, the iconography of the domestic tourist who would go to the coast but cannot afford to – who remarks: "We're throwing the Greeks into the sea, we're not letting the Syrians into the sea, what exactly are we doing, brother?" The centrally positioned figure responds: "We can't go on holiday". In the upper right corner, three Syrian figures converse in their own language. The leftmost asks, "Sho hal eyyam?" [What kind of days are these?][2]. The one in the middle replies, "Eyyam-ı bahur", (an Ottoman Turkish phrase meaning "dog days of summer"), and the rightmost joins in by saying, "Mabrouk, mabrouk" [blessed or congratulations][3].

The phrase "throwing the Greeks into the sea" is a canonical reference to the culmination of the Turkish War of Independence, most notably the liberation of İzmir from the Greeks in September 1922. This trope traditionally signifies the restoration of sovereignty, the expulsion of imperialist forces, and the symbolic consolidation of national borders. In collective memory, the Aegean thus operates as a site of decisive Turkish agency and victory. Sarıkaya's (2024) caricature performs a ruthless inversion of this founding myth. The figure falling into the sea, shouting "Kifidis!!" introduces a deliberate visual ambiguity. When read alongside the dialogue – "Summer is coming… it will annoy me" – the sea is stripped of its 1922 associations of military triumph. The Greek figure is recontextualised: no longer the defeated enemy, he is now the gatekeeper – a reminder that the former adversary has become a privileged EU member. This shift reflects contemporary anxieties regarding the EU-Turkey deal and the restrictive Schengen visa regime, under which Turkish citizens increasingly face rejection (Caglayan & Erkoyun, 2022). The Aegean – once imagined as the canvas of national victory – is refigured as a site of bureaucratic and geopolitical exclusion.

Read in the context of its publication date, the caricature satirises the Turkish citizen's inability to reach the sea under conditions of severe economic precarity. This economic paralysis is crystallised in the speech bubble "Tatile gidemiyoruz" [We can't go on holiday], which anchors xenophobic resentment in material deprivation rather than cultural friction alone. Amid the hyperinflation and

2 A reference to Lebanese singer Ziad Rahbani's song with the same title.

3 Another reference to Lebanese singer Ramy Ayach's song with the same title.

eroded purchasing power of 2024, leisure shifted from a routine expectation to an unaffordable luxury for the working and middle classes. On this logic of relative deprivation and zero-sum competition, the presence of Syrian refugees on public beaches is reinterpreted as displacement: the premise that "if I cannot afford a holiday and the Syrian is at the seaside, then the Syrian has displaced me". This affective calculus is further intensified by widespread disinformation that Syrians receive state salaries, subsidised housing, and tax exemptions (Filibeli & Ertuna, 2021, p. 2251).

The right side of the caricature, signifying the influx from east and south, operates through a distinct set of visual and linguistic codes that contrast sharply with the kinetic singularity of the Greek figure. Here, the Syrians are depicted as a collective mass – three figures serving as a metonym for an entire population. This collectivisation is reinforced through a polemical re-semanticisation of the term "mabrouk" [blessed or congratulations]. Stripped of its function as a neutral pleasantry, the word is weaponised to imply either a self-congratulatory breach of the border or a mockery of a Turkish public perceived to be permitting an "invasion". The rhythmic repetition of "mabrouk, mabrouk" produces a festive auditory register that collides with the Turkish figure's declaration of economic immobility. This juxtaposition reinforces a nationalist fantasy: Türkiye is framed as a land of unearned benefit for refugees while functioning as a site of debt and restriction for its own citizens. The phonetic rendering of Arabic in Latin script "audibilises" the scene, activating anxieties of cultural displacement. This effect is intensified by the inclusion of the Levantine phrase "Sho hal eyyam?" [What days are these?]. By invoking Ziad Rahbani's famous lyrics, the caricature situates the figures within a coherent Arab cultural repertoire that remains opaque to the average Turkish viewer. Rendered in Latin script, the phrase generates cognitive dissonance, evoking the perceived "noise" of a transformed urban soundscape in cities like Istanbul or Gaziantep. Within this nationalist framework, the question "What days are these?" reads not as shared bewilderment but as an ironic commentary on a national disorder the refugees are imagined to have authored.

Read together, the three caricatures reveal the internal grammar of the "theft of enjoyment" fantasy with particular precision. Across the marketplace, the domestic interior, and the public beach, the satirical reversal is the same: the figure who is positioned as having stolen Turkish enjoyment is the one most clearly without it – the migrant exposed to the hustle, sleeping on a stone, watched but unmoving on the shoreline – while the figure who imagines himself dispossessed is the one most actively trying to recover something that was never coherent to begin with. What the caricatures stage is not the loss of an object but the disintegration of a fantasy that depended on a believing Other, the reflexive structure Žižek (1993) identifies as constitutive of the national Thing. The Syrian refugee, in this satirical mode, is less a thief than a witness: someone whose presence makes legible the

precariousness, the disinvestment, and the economic immobilisation that Turkish citizens were already living with. The caricatures' humour is therefore double-edged. It registers xenophobic resentment as a real affective fact, but it also exposes the structural irony at the centre of that resentment – that the obsessive monitoring of borders, beaches, and public spaces is itself a symptom of the very immobility it claims to defend against.

3. Conclusion

This article has examined three caricatures published in Turkish humorous magazines in order to trace how Syrians are visually and discursively negotiated within satirical media. Through close semiotic readings, it has shown that caricatures function as critical sites where everyday nationalism and economic anxiety intersect. Rather than offering a singular or stable representation, the caricatures oscillate between figuring Syrians as integrated social actors, as displaced equals, and as antagonistic figures imagined to threaten national enjoyment. Analysed through Žižek's concepts of the "national Thing" and the "theft of enjoyment", these images reveal that resentment toward Syrians is driven less by cultural difference per se than by the perceived loss of leisure, mobility, and economic security among the Turkish population. Crucially, the humour of these caricatures exposes the incoherence of exclusionary fantasies: the citizen who seeks to police borders, beaches, and public spaces is himself immobilised by structural economic conditions that remain entirely beyond the refugee's control.

These dynamics have not subsided with the political transition in Syria. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 reopened the question of return, and Turkish authorities have since reported several hundred thousand voluntary returns alongside an expanded "go-and-see" visit policy (ECRE, 2025; Ferris, 2025). Yet anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye remains the highest recorded in any country surveyed by UNHCR (Ferris, 2025), and the caricatures examined here continue to circulate as part of the affective archive that any post-2024 return debate must reckon with. The xenophobic fantasy these images stage – that the refugee's presence is what blocks the citizen's enjoyment – does not dissolve when border flows reverse. It migrates, attaching itself instead to those who remain, to those who hesitate, and to the new ambiguities of a transition whose outcome is still being negotiated.

Announcements

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