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Sefa Secen & Aykut Öztürk

To cite this article: Sefa Secen & Aykut Öztürk (17 Jul 2024): How refugees respond to hostile political discourse: no exit, but less voice, Politics, Groups, and Identities, DOI: 10.1080/21565503.2024.2375716

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2024.2375716
How refugees respond to hostile political discourse: no exit, but less voice

Sefa Secen\textsuperscript{a} and Aykut Öztürk\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Mershon Center for International Security Studies, Ohio State University, and incoming Assistant Professor, Nazareth University, Rochester, NY, USA; \textsuperscript{b}The School of Social & Political Sciences, The University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

How does the political discourse about refugees influence their attitudes in the host country? Relying on an online survey and experiment conducted with Syrian refugees in Turkey and Germany, this study explores the relationship between political discourse and refugees’ two potential attitudinal responses: political integration and return. Our observational analysis demonstrates that refugees’ perception of the political discourses about them is the variable most consistently associated with attitudes in these domains. Our experimental results reveal that hostile political discourse, compared to a welcoming political discourse, undermines refugees’ political integration, weakening both their political interest and willingness to participate in host country politics. However, our experimental findings suggest that political discourse does not significantly impact refugees’ intentions to return. Overall, our results demonstrate that refugees’ perceptions of political discourse are an important determinant of their attitudes toward host country politics, and more research is warranted on the topic.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 August 2023
Accepted 12 June 2024

KEYWORDS

Political integration; return; Turkey; Germany; political discourse; Syrian refugees

Introduction

Humanity is living amid refugee crises. Over 100 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide in the last two decades as a result of ongoing conflicts in, among many places, Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Yemen (UNHCR 2024). What factors impact refugees’ attitudes toward host country politics? While scholars have extensively studied the political attitudes of host countries’ citizens toward refugees (Abdelaaty and Steele 2022; Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; von Hermanni and Neumann 2019), there has been limited attention on refugees’ political integration and decisions regarding return.

Drawing on online survey experiments conducted in Turkey and Germany, we explore how the hostile political discourse, which exists in most host countries to
varying degrees, shapes the attitudes of Syrian refugees toward host country politics. Narrowly defined, political discourse is the language used by politicians and political institutions, such as presidents, prime ministers, other members of government, parliament, and political parties at the local, national, and international levels (van Dijk 1997). Many studies find that political discourses affect public attitudes toward refugees and immigrants in host countries (Bohman 2011; Hjerm 2007; Pettersson and Augostinos 2021; Pérez 2015; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara 2023). Diverging from this literature, our study explores how discourses impact refugees’ political attitudes as well as intentions and aspirations to return.

We conceptualize two attitudinal reactions to hostile political discourses by refugees: voice and exit. Voice refers to attitudes that motivate integration into a host country’s politics, such as developing an interest and participating in the politics of the host country. Political integration refers to the process of becoming a part of mainstream political debates, practices, and decision-making (Bloemraad 2006).

To begin with, there are good reasons to pay more attention to refugees’ political integration. First of all, although only a small number of refugees hold political rights, such as voting in national elections and running for office, their current interest and participation in national politics may influence their future political attitudes once they attain citizenship. Secondly, host countries’ politics and migration laws directly impact the well-being of refugees as new residents, perhaps even more than the well-being of citizens protected with strong political rights. Meaningful refugee input in the governance of their host countries or the international organizations that work for them (i.e., United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) is, therefore, a moral imperative (Bekaj, and Antara 2018; Milner, Alio, and Gardi 2022; Secen 2022). As a result, in some 22 countries, refugees and migrants have been granted limited voting rights, contributing to a new democratic norm (Earnest 2003). Yet, meaningful refugee participation might be possible only if refugees are willing and encouraged to take an interest in politics in their host countries.

Hostile political discourse may also prompt refugees to make a completely different choice: exit. Refugees exposed to such political discourse may become more likely to consider returning to their home countries. This trend is increasingly evident, given that many political actors in host countries share plans to send refugees to their home countries, even forcibly if necessary.

We use an online experiment to test the relationship between political discourse, political integration, and intentions and willingness to return. Our research shows that hostile political discourse has a significant impact on Syrian refugees’ political integration as it decreases their political interest and willingness to participate in politics. These findings are consistent with existing literature that associates the success or failure of political integration among refugees and immigrants with the reception they receive rather than solely their individual characteristics (Bloemraad 2006).

However, we do not find an important effect of the political discourse on Syrian refugees’ intentions and willingness to return to Syria. These results support Alrababah et al. (2023) and Arias et al. (2014), who argue that conditions in a host country do not significantly impact refugees’ return decisions. People who have fled due to the violence, persecution, and destruction brought by a civil war want to return home only when these
threats completely dissipate (Alrababah et al. 2023). From a broader perspective, our findings suggest that hostile political discourse results in refugees remaining in host countries while limiting their political agency.

The remainder of this study is organized into five sections. First, we review the literature on political interest and participation among migrants, as well as the role of political discourses. Second, we provide background information on the Turkish and German cases. Third, we outline our sampling methodology and experimental design. Fourth, we present and discuss our results. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the implications of our findings.

Voice, exit, and the role of political discourse

Most studies treat refugees as objects of politics rather than as subjects. In media discourses, refugees are either portrayed as victims – traumatized and vulnerable – or as security threats, inciting fears of safety loss on various grounds. Neither the victimhood nor the blaming narrative envisions or endorses increased political interest and participation among refugees. In contrast to such studies and narratives, this study treats refugees as political agents and focuses on their responses to the hostile political discourse in their host countries, which we argue might take the form of limited political integration as well as plans and aspirations to leave the host country.

To understand refugees’ attitudes toward political integration, we examine two of its fundamental aspects: refugees’ interest in the host country’s politics and their willingness for political participation. Political interest is the foundational motivation, predisposition, and familiarity with a political system and its ideological spectrum that spurs engagement with it (Robison 2017). It is the most powerful predictor of political behaviors that make democracy work, such as voting, running for office, and political activism (Prior 2010). Higher political interest is considered a desirable trait of responsible and democratic citizenship (Rebenstorf 2004).

Political integration also builds on individuals’ willingness to actively participate in politics. Political participation is essential for political integration and a healthy democracy. Formal and informal political participation manifests in various forms such as voting, demonstrating, petitioning, boycotting, donating to political campaigns, joining political associations, consultative bodies, and civil society organizations (Van Deth 2016). Without political interest and participation, refugees cannot become equal and full members of their new societies nor can they play significant civic, political, and economic roles. However, we also foresee that formal participation in politics or acquisition of citizenship may not automatically lead to the substantive dimensions of citizenship, such as a strong sense of belonging and inclusion. In some countries, a form of cultural or nativist citizenship may be dominant where non-native-born residents are expected or forced to develop a symbolic and emotional attachment to the majority culture (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016).

The literature focuses on several correlates and causes of political interest and participation among migrants. We divide the findings into three broad categories: demographic, sociological, and political. Starting with demographic factors, the literature finds a strong correlation between political participation among migrants and their length of stay, age, race, ethnicity, education, income, language ability, employment,
residential, and marital statuses (Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner 1991; Manza and Crowley 2018; Ramakrishnan, Karthick, and Espenshade 2001; Schildkraut 2005; Wong 2000). For instance, Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner (1991) suggest that the longer Latino immigrants have been in the United States, the more likely they are to identify as Democrats and to have strong party preferences, as the party favors minorities and other disadvantaged groups. They also contend that as immigrants’ economic conditions improve in the US, so does their support for the Republicans, which is one of the reasons why Asians are more supportive of the Republican party than Latinos. Similarly, Ramakrishnan, Karthick, and Espenshade (2001) note a strong correlation between political participation among migrants and employment status, residential location, and marital status. According to their findings, factors such as employment status, marital status, and residing in diverse residential areas contribute to increased political participation. These factors have a positive influence on community connections, stability in life, sense of responsibility, and access to resources.

Concerning sociological factors, a growing body of work investigates how peers and formal and informal networks impact the political participation of migrants (Fennema and Tillie 1999; Jacobs and Tillie 2004; Sobolewska et al. 2015). In particular, these studies explore how migrants draw on past experiences and transfer the lessons learned from their old environment (Black 1987; Black, Niemi, and Powell 1987; Finifter and Finifter 1989). Many studies suggest that early exposure to political activities has a significant impact on political participation for a lifetime (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; King and Merelman 1986; Knoke, Jennings, and Niemi 1982). Regarding network effects, Sobolewska et al. (2015) find that regular attendance at the events of a politically active religious denomination increases political participation among migrants in the UK. Differently, DeSipio (1996) contend that Latino political participation in the US is negatively correlated with living in areas with higher Latino concentration due to the effects of poverty, greater proportions of noncitizens, and peers with low English proficiency.

With respect to political factors, the literature examines the impact of foreign policy positions, institutional barriers to registering and voting, and prior political experience with a repressive regime. For example, Cain, Kiewiet, and Uhlaner (1991) show that unlike Latinos, immigrants from East Asia (Taiwan, Korea) and Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) become more Republican with increased exposure to American politics. They argue that this is because these individuals were at the frontline in the American efforts to contain the expansion of communism during the Cold War, and they, therefore, feel closer to the Republicans, who have historically had a tougher stance on communism. Regarding prior political experience with a repressive regime, there are mixed results. Portes and Mozo (1985) demonstrate that Cuban Americans who fled a repressive regime have higher turnout levels than other Hispanic subgroups. In contrast, Ramakrishnan, Karthick, and Espenshade (2001) claim that coming from a repressive regime has no significant effect on voting among migrants in the US. Nevertheless, their results suggest that anti-immigrant legislation and political competition have a positive effect on participation among first- and second-generation migrants.

We argue that a causal study of the impact of political discourses on refugees is absent in these different strands of the literature. Political discourse is a frame of meaning produced based on text and talk in public policy or politics. It may be produced by the
In this project, we use “political discourse” to specifically refer to the degree to which political leaders and parties adopt a hostile, anti-refugee rhetoric versus an accommodative, pro-refugee one. In this context, a pro-refugee discourse promotes the humanitarian protection of Syrians and opposes their forced return to Syria, while a hostile, anti-refugee discourse presents them as a threat in one form or another and pushes for their forced return to Syria.

Political discourses of politicians are not only influenced by public attitudes but also have the power to shape these attitudes. In this regard, several studies focus on how political discourses impact public attitudes toward refugees and immigrants and their formation of identity. Drawing upon cross-national data from the European Social Survey over 18 years, Schmidt-Catran and Czymara (2023) show how anti-immigrant attitudes strongly correlate with political discourses. In addition, Pettersson and Augoustinos (2021) examine how political discourses justify and legitimate the social exclusion of diverse refugee groups. There is, therefore, a strong basis to believe that political discourses can affect refugees’ political interest and participation, just as they affect the political interest and participation of native citizens. As such, in a political environment where politicians adopt hostile discourses, refugees may struggle to develop positive attitudes toward the political system.

We argue that negative political discourses discourage refugees from political participation for several reasons. Firstly, these discourses engender a sense of exclusion and alienation, making refugees feel unwelcome and marginalized in their host societies. This may lead to disengagement from the political process, as refugees may perceive their participation as futile or undesirable. Secondly, negative political discourses may fuel fear and anxiety among refugees, particularly if they feel targeted or scapegoated. This may prompt a prioritization of immediate concerns, such as safety and security, over engagement in formal and informal political activities. Thirdly, negative political discourses may reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against refugees, causing them to internalize feelings of inadequacy. This may further discourage refugees from engaging in political activities, as they may feel powerless to participate.

In addition to exploring political interest and participation, we investigate the effect of political discourses on refugees’ intentions and willingness to return as an alternative coping strategy in the face of hostile political discourse. Existing research primarily focuses on two sets of factors, namely push and pull factors, to elucidate return decisions: conditions in the host country (e.g., hostility, discrimination, poor living conditions) and conditions in the home country (e.g., dissipation of armed conflicts and threats) (Alrababah et al. 2023; Arias et al. 2014; Borjas and Bratsberg 1996; Stefanovic, Loizides, and Parsons 2015). However, there is a notable dearth of studies examining the impact of political discourses, a key driver of political attitudes, on refugees’ intentions regarding return.

**Syrian refugee policies and discourses in Turkey and Germany**

Our study relies on data collected in Turkey and Germany. These countries offer a good comparison for several reasons. Turkey, with approximately 3.8 million Syrian refugees, and Germany, with around 800,000, are among the top host countries for displaced Syrians. Moreover, both countries have become a sanctuary for immigrants from
Ukraine, Iran, Iraq, and the broader Middle East. Nevertheless, they also differ in crucial dimensions. Germany boasts one of the world’s most robust democratic political systems, characterized by strong protections for political rights. Conversely, Turkey has transformed into an electoral authoritarian regime under the personalized rule of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his political party, the Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish acronym AKP), over the past two decades (Öztürk and Reilly 2022).

Significantly, refugee policies in both countries have exhibited simultaneous progressive and restrictive tendencies over the years, offering fertile ground for manipulating respondents’ perceptions in an experimental setup. Against this background, the following sections provide brief accounts of policies and attitudes toward Syrian refugees in these countries from 2011 to 2024.

**Turkey**

Between 2011 and 2014, Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party adopted an open border policy and admitted Syrian refugees en masse. The presence of a conservative party with transnational religious sensitivities in power during these early years significantly influenced the country’s policies toward Syria and refugees. A coalition government or an ultra-nationalist or secularist government could have pursued more isolationist and restrictive foreign policies toward Syria, as this had been the hallmark of foreign policy-making toward the Middle East in the pre-AKP era (Secen 2021). The Turkish government was convinced that the war would end soon and that refugees would safely and voluntarily return home. Perceiving the refugee flows only as a temporary issue, it informally referred to Syrian refugees as *misafir* (guests), rather than granting them any legal status under the international refugee regime. Turkish public attitudes were primarily driven by empathy and solidarity with refugees during the early years of the Syrian refugee crisis (Alakoc et al. 2021).

However, as the war intensified and the number of refugees fleeing to Turkey reached millions in 2015, favorable public sentiments were put to the test. Many people, especially in border cities, protested the ruling Justice and Development Party’s Syria policies and their impacts on the country. It became evident that the government’s initial expectations were untenable and that the refugees would not return to Syria anytime soon. The AKP’s emphasis on “Islamic brotherhood” with Syrian refugees also led to the politicization of the refugee issue. Turkey’s Alevi community and its secular constituency protested what they called the “Sunnification” policy, while Kurds perceived a political plot in the resettlement of large numbers of Arabs in the Kurdish-majority southeast (Secen and Gurbuz 2021). In fact, with a large number of refugee settlements completed, the ethnic and sectarian composition of Turkey’s border cities has rapidly changed.

Amidst the growing refugee flows, the Turkish government introduced new legislation, the *Law on Foreigners and International Protection* (LIFP), in 2014 to regulate its refugee affairs. Under the LIFP, Syrians displaced due to the ongoing war and armed conflicts were granted temporary protection status, providing them with legal residency and the right to apply for a work permit. Furthermore, in September 2014, the Ministry of National Education issued a circular letter emphasizing that Syrian children who fled Syria are guaranteed primary and high school education and can enroll in public schools and education centers. In the following months, the country’s higher education council also announced that Syrians would be able to enter eight Turkish
universities without examination. These regulations marked the initial steps toward refugees’ integration into the country’s legal, educational, and economic system. Additionally, President Erdoğan declared in July 2016 that Turkey would grant full citizenship to highly skilled Syrian refugees. Around 200,000 Syrians obtained citizenship by 2022 (D’Ignoti 2023).

Nonetheless, with the prolonged refugee presence, social attitudes toward Syrian refugees have started to take a nativist turn. Against the backdrop of a chronic economic decline, a wide range of myths focusing on the costs of hosting refugees began to shape the public perceptions of Syrian refugees. Opposition parties developed tendencies to capitalize on the public’s collective anxieties.

Political parties currently display three different approaches toward Syrian refugees, all emphasizing their return yet under varying conditions. First, the ruling People’s Alliance, comprising the AKP, its partner Nationalist Movement Party (known by its Turkish acronym MHP), and several smaller conservative parties, does not call for an immediate and forced return of refugees. They highlight that the Syrians’ return to their country should be voluntary and only after the civil war ends and peace is restored. Second, the main opposition bloc, the Nations’ Alliance promises to return refugees to Syria by negotiating with the political actors, primarily Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but emphasizes that this will take place under humanitarian conditions (Irgil and Norman 2024). Finally, the Victory Party, the newly-formed far-right party, bases its political campaigning solely on the promise of forcibly returning refugees to Syria (Irgil 2024). They problematize the acquisition of Turkish citizenship by refugees and blame not only the government but also refugees for causing a wide range of societal, political, and economic ills. The party gained significant traction particularly during the second round of the 2023 Presidential elections when they threw their support behind the opposition candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, in exchange for ministerial positions.

Syrian refugees are currently perceived as an economic threat by city dwellers, as they face increasing pressure to compete for a limited number of jobs and accept lower wages. This competition for employment is particularly evident in certain urban enclaves, where internal Kurdish migrants also vie for similar job opportunities, leading to communal tensions (Secen and Gurbuz 2021). These emerging urban anxieties have impacted the electoral calculus of nationalist parties’ strategists and elites (Secen, Al, and Arslan 2024). Victory Party, the newly-formed far-right party, has capitalized on the escalation of anti-migration sentiments among the secular middle classes.

Germany

The opening of borders in response to the European refugee crisis was arguably one of the most significant decisions in German politics since the reunification of Germany in the 1990s. German attitudes and policies toward Syrian refugees have undergone important changes over time. Between 2011 and 2015, in alignment with other European countries, Germany provided humanitarian relief for refugees and collaborated with host countries in the region to mitigate refugee flows into Europe. During the early years of the Syrian refugee crisis, admitting refugees in large numbers was considered an undesirable policy option. However, in August 2015, with hundreds of thousands of Syrians fleeing and crossing the Mediterranean, Chancellor Angela Merkel, the leader of the coalition government, faced a critical decision. While several European
countries immediately implemented border controls and suspended the Schengen system, the coalition government opted to keep German borders open and did not subject Syrians to the Dublin Regulation. This regulation requires asylum seekers to apply for protection in the countries of first entry and allows other EU countries to return asylum seekers to those countries.

The decision led to a rift between the Christian Democrats (CDU) and its allies, as well as within the CDU and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière, Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, and CSU leader Horst Seehofer advocated for a more restrictive limit on the number of refugees and other migrants (Thomas 2015). Seehofer warned Merkel that if the country continued to refuse to implement an upper limit, his party would file a complaint with the German constitutional court (Sky News 2015). Amid increasing pressures, Germany’s prevailing liberal attitudes shifted, and border controls and Dublin rules were reinstated in November 2015. Overall, the open-door policies lasted for less than two months, between September 2015 and November 2015.

The coalition government brokered a refugee deal with Turkey in November 2015, aiming to contain the influx of refugees crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands and prevent massive refugee flows into Europe. Under the deal, irregular refugees who arrived in Greece would be returned to Turkey, and for every irregular refugee returned, one refugee would be resettled in Europe. Despite Chancellor Merkel’s resistance to the scapegoating of Syrian refugees and the militarization of Germany’s borders by the far-right AfD and center-right CSU, her policies generally exhibited both restrictive and permissive tendencies. While Merkel espoused a humanitarian discourse in principle, she also shifted the government’s refugee policies to manage intra and inter-party tensions as well as public disgruntlement with refugees.

Refugee issues gradually became a source of political cleavage and bolstered the position of anti-refugee parties in Germany. The AfD increased its seat share in the German Parliament and secured third place after winning 13% of the votes in 2017 (Atlantic Council 2019). Public support for the government’s asylum policies also dwindled. For instance, a survey conducted in 2016 revealed that 60% of Germans favored a fixed limit on refugees, while 35% opposed it. Notably, 81% of individuals identifying themselves as supporters of the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) expressed enthusiasm about the idea of a cap. Support for a cap was also significant among followers of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU) at 64%, followed by the Free Democratic Party (57%), the Left Party (54%), and the Social Democrats (52%) (Deutsche, 2016). Additionally, there was growing opposition to Chancellor Merkel’s refugee policies from certain social organizations on the fringes of German society. Far-right social movements such as Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) and the neo-Nazi organization NPD protested and engaged in a disinformation campaign against refugees.

In line with their defensive and parochial rhetoric, the AfD opposed open borders and demanded the complete closure of the EU’s external borders. An AfD politician in North Rhine-Westphalia even went as far as declaring that, if necessary, Germany’s borders must be protected using the force of arms, inviting the armed forces to shoot refugees (Deutsche, 2016). In a further escalation of their anti-Syrian refugee agenda, AfD members visited Damascus in 2019 and met with representatives of the Assad government. The primary goal of the far-right party was to designate Syria as a safe country,
not only to facilitate the return of refugees to Syria but also to deny them refugee status and humanitarian protection in Germany (Deutsche, 2019).

A new majority-left coalition government (SPD-FDP-Green) came to power in Germany in 2021, promising more liberal asylum policies. However, polls indicate that the popularity of the AfD is increasing, with its current support rate at around 21%, making it the party with the second-highest support rate in the country. This outcome reflects growing public dissatisfaction with liberal migration policies and an inclination to support a party that promises to reverse or at least restrict these policies.

Situating our study within these contexts, we examine the effects of political discourses on refugees' political integration and intentions and willingness to return. We propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Hostile political discourse decreases Syrian refugees' political interest and participation.

H2: Hostile political discourse increases Syrian refugees' intentions and willingness to return to Syria.

Research design

In order to test the hypotheses listed above, we conducted online survey experiments in both Turkey and Germany. Prior to data collection, our survey experiments were registered on the Open Science Foundation’s (OSF) website.

Sample

Our survey in Turkey was conducted between February 10, 2023, and February 21, 2023. In Germany, our survey was conducted between March 16, 2023, and April 5, 2023. Throughout these periods, we recruited survey participants via paid advertisements published on Meta’s social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram. Paid advertisements on social media have become increasingly common for comparative political scientists seeking to recruit participants for online surveys, especially for hard-to-reach groups such as migrants (Neundorf and Öztürk 2023; Pötzschke 2022). In our study, we targeted users of Meta platforms residing in Turkey and Germany who speak Arabic and have arrived after the Syrian Civil War. Our advertisements were in Arabic.

To ensure a more representative sample, we utilized incentive-based advertisements. Our advertisements offered participants the opportunity to enter a lottery for an Amazon voucher worth approximately $50/€50 (Neundorf and Öztürk 2022). To prevent Arabic speakers from other countries of origin from presenting themselves as Syrian refugees, our advertisements and survey did not explicitly state that we were only interested in Syrian refugees. Yet, we ended the survey of other Arabic speakers shortly after we learned about their country of origin and year of arrival. We also prevented social media users from taking the survey twice.

We recruited a total of 3,922 individuals, all of whom were successfully assigned to experimental conditions. Among this sample, 28% are refugees currently residing in Germany, while the remaining participants live in Turkey. The larger refugee population in Turkey facilitated an easier recruitment process in this country. Although our sample is not probability-based, as we relied on social media advertisements, it is sufficiently diverse to allow for causal inference through experiments. It appears that the use of
incentives did not significantly skew the demographic composition of our research participants.

Consistent with data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) regarding Syrian demographics, 45% of our sample comprised women, and only one-quarter of the respondents held a degree above the high school level. Syria has a young population, with a median age of 22, and only 3% of its population is over 60, while 44% are women (Arab Center 2023; UNHCR 2023; UNPF 2024). Similarly, the youth constituted the largest age group in our sample. Younger age groups are also more likely to undertake dangerous migration journeys and utilize social media platforms like Facebook. Table 1 summarizes the demographic composition of our sample.

### Table 1. Demographic composition of the sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Proportion in our sample</th>
<th>Proportion in our sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–34</td>
<td>No education</td>
<td>51.45</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–64</td>
<td>Primary School</td>
<td>45.42</td>
<td>16.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>26.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>45.06</td>
<td>9.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>54.94</td>
<td>12.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Master’s Degree or higher</td>
<td>71.60</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Proportion in our sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>71.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>28.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pre-treatment variables**

Before being assigned to the treatment arms, all participants responded to a set of pre-treatment questions. Based on these questions, we created the following pre-treatment variables: gender, age, highest education level attained, participation in formal education in host country (binary variable), employment status (binary variable), marriage status (binary variable), household income (standardized according to the sample of the host country), being a citizen (binary variable), years since arrival to host country, religiosity, Sunni/non-Sunni (binary variable), proficiency in the language of the host country, and the host country (binary variable). As discussed above, these variables are considered key determinants of refugees’ political attitudes in the literature. We use them as control variables in our analyses. A list of the wording of the questions and descriptive statistics on these questions is available in Appendix Section 2.

**Experimental design and manipulation check**

Our experimental design aimed to manipulate Syrian refugees’ perceptions of the political discourses about them in host countries. After responding to pre-treatment questions, our survey participants were randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions, in which they were asked to read a short text. Respondents in the first treatment group read the text below:

There is an emerging consensus among political parties in Turkey [Germany] regarding the Syrian issue. Most politicians state that Turkey [Germany] will protect Syrians who took refuge in the country and never forcibly return them to Syria.
Respondents in the second treatment group read the following text:

There is an emerging consensus among political parties in Turkey [Germany] regarding the Syrian issue. Most politicians state that Syrian refugees are a threat to Turkish [German] identity, and they need to be sent back to Syria.

In order to check whether randomization worked as planned, we ran regression models in which assignment into the treatment group was the dependent variable, and pre-treatment variables were independent variables. None of the variables was significant at a 0.1 significance level. This analysis is included in Appendix Section 3. To assess whether our experiment successfully manipulated the perceptions of political discourses among Syrian refugees in Turkey and Germany, we included three post-treatment questions on their perceptions of the political discourse in the country. Specifically, we asked our respondents to what extent they thought “Turkish [German] politicians,” “government politicians,” or “opposition politicians” welcomed Syrian refugees. For these three questions, the response scale ranged from 0 (not welcoming at all) to 10 (very welcoming).

Responses to these questions demonstrate that Syrian refugees in our sample have gained a good understanding of the dominant political discourses about them. Refugees living in Germany rated the political discourse about them more positively than refugees living in Turkey (5/10 vs. 3.5/10). Respondents in both countries also rated the government discourse more positively than the discourse of opposition parties (6.4/10 vs. 4.8/10 in Germany, 5.5/10 versus 3.7/10 in Turkey). These results reflect the predominantly negative approach of opposition parties and the lukewarm approach of governments toward Syrian refugees in both countries. We ran two Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models for each of the three outcome variables. The first model incorporated no control variables, while the second model included the control variables mentioned earlier. To simplify the presentation of results, we reverse-coded responses to the manipulation check questions, ensuring that higher values indicated greater perceptions of hostility towards refugees. The results presented in Figure 1 illustrate that our treatment effectively manipulated how Syrian refugees perceive political discourses in Turkey and Germany. For instance, concerning the first question, a one standard deviation increase in the treatment corresponded to a 0.1 standard deviation increase in the perception of hostility.

**Outcome variables**

We used three post-treatment variables to measure political integration. First, we asked our respondents how interested they were in the politics of their host countries. Response options were “to a great extent,” “to some extent,” “not much,” and “not at all.” The level of political interest was similarly low across both countries. Around 70% of our respondents in both countries expressed “not much” or “not at all” interest, while fewer than 10% of our respondents expressed “to a great extent” interest.

We assessed political participation through two questions. Firstly, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “Syrians should be more involved in Turkish [German] politics,” with response options ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” This question aimed to reveal how respondents, as members of the Syrian refugee community, perceive their involvement in the politics of the host country. Agreement with the statement suggests a willingness to increase political
engagement, likely extending to encouraging and supporting family members, friends, and fellow Syrians to participate in politics. Notably, while 60% of refugees in Germany agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, only 30% in Turkey selected these options. We refer to this variable as “willingness for [Syrian] political participation” in the remainder of the text.

Finally, we asked our respondents whether they would vote if they had the right to vote. More than 90% of our respondents were not citizens, and they did not have the right to vote. However, around 80% of our respondents said they would vote if they had the right. We call this variable “hypothetical turnout” in the rest of the text. In addition to these questions, we asked our respondents two post-treatment questions measuring their intentions and willingness to leave the host country. First, we asked them whether they planned to return to Syria in the next 12 months. More than 90% of respondents in both countries answered this question negatively. In the remainder of the text, we refer to this variable as “intentions to return.” Second, we asked our respondents whether they hoped to return to Syria one day. More than 70% of respondents living in Turkey said that they hope to return to Syria one day. This proportion was only around 40% in Germany. In the remainder of the text, we refer to this variable as “willingness to return.”

**Results: political integration**

**Cross-sectional analysis**

In Table 2, we document the relationship between refugees’ perceptions of the political discourse in Turkey and their political integration, measured through three different
variables. In addition to all control variables introduced above, these models include the post-treatment measure of perceptions of political discourse, which was also used for the manipulation checks. We reverse-coded these variables to reflect the perceptions of hostility in the discourse against refugees so that they have the same direction as the coding of our treatment variable.

Models 1, 6, and 11 demonstrate that the perception of anti-refugee hostility in the political discourse is the most consistent predictor of refugees’ integration into the politics of the host country. One standard deviation increase in respondents’ perception of the hostility in the political discourse is associated with around 0.1 standard deviations across the three outcome variables.

In Models 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, and 13, we replace the variable measuring perceptions of all politicians with variables respectively measuring perceptions of incumbent and opposition politicians. This analysis demonstrates that perceptions regarding incumbents’ political discourse matter the most and perceptions of the opposition’s political discourse are not associated with political integration. This may be because the perception of positive incumbent discourse is sufficient to stimulate interest in politics and create willingness for political participation and hypothetical turnout.

In addition to political discourse, our models indicate that two other variables consistently correlate with the outcome variables: age and language proficiency. Being older and being more fluent in the language of the host country are associated with all three measures of political integration: political interest, willingness for political participation, and hypothetical turnout. Being in Germany, compared to being in Turkey, also has a positive impact on the willingness for Syrian political participation. Apart from these variables, we see diverse relationships between other control variables and outcome variables.

**Experimental analysis**

Perceptions of hostility in the political discourse are closely associated with refugees’ political attitudes. However, we have not yet established that this is a causal relationship. Models 4, 5, 9, 10, 14, and 15 document these relationships with and without control variables. Models 4 and 5 demonstrate that hostile political discourse, compared to a welcoming political discourse, causes a decrease in political interest. $P$-value equals 0.011 and 0.004, respectively, in models without and with control variables. We also find a negative effect of hostile political discourse on support for Syrian political participation through Models 9 and 10. $P$-value equals 0.111 and 0.021, respectively, in models without and with control variables. Finally, as illustrated by Models 14 and 15, we did not find a significant effect of our treatment on willingness to vote if the respondent was given the right to vote. However, in hindsight, we are skeptical that this was the right question to ask for the experimental setting. More than 90% of our sample comprised people who did not have voting rights in their host countries. Thus, asking respondents to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which they were given the right to vote was almost equal with a positive treatment.

**Mediation analysis**

As another test of the reliability of our theoretical and empirical findings, we checked whether the effect of the treatment on political interest and participation is mediated
Table 2. The correlates and causes of political integration for Syrian refugees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment: Hostile discourse</th>
<th>Hostility in Discourse</th>
<th>Hypothetical turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hostile Gov.</td>
<td>Hostility in Discourse: Gov.</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility in Discourse: Opp.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since arrival</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language proficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host country: Germany</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>1902</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. All values are standardized.
through the changes in the refugees’ perceptions of political discourses. Showing a mediation relationship would increase the confidence in our account of treatment effects. In Table 3, we present the results of the mediation analysis.

**Table 3.** Mediation analysis: treatment, perceptions of political discourse, political interest and participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome: Political Interest</th>
<th>Mean 95% Confidence Int.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACME</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment → Perceptions in Political Discourse → Political Interest</td>
<td>−0.01 −0.02 −0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment → Political Interest</td>
<td>−0.03 −0.08 0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment → Political Interest</td>
<td>−0.05 −0.09 −0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proportion of total effect mediated</strong></td>
<td>0.26 0.13 1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Political Participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACME</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment → Perceptions in Political Discourse → Political Participation</td>
<td>−0.02 −0.03 −0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment → Political Participation</td>
<td>−0.04 −0.08 0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment → Political Participation</td>
<td>−0.04 −0.08 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proportion of total effect mediated</strong></td>
<td>0.48 −3.66 3.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analysis conducted in Stata with mediation package.

For both political interest and participation, changes in refugees’ perceptions of political discourses significantly and fully mediate the effect of treatment. Between 25% and 50% of the treatment effect on political interest and participation is mediated through the perceptions of political discourses, and there is no significant relationship between the treatment and outcome variables once we control for these changes.

**Results: attitudes toward return**

**Cross-sectional analysis**

Table 4 documents the correlates of refugees’ attitudes toward return to their home countries through the two outcome variables introduced above. Models 1 and 6 demonstrate that the perception of anti-refugee hostility in the political discourse is strongly associated with refugees’ intentions and willingness to return to Syria. Models 2, 3, 7, and 8 again demonstrate that this association is more about the perception of incumbent party discourse rather than the opposition party discourse.

We also observe that respondents living in Germany exhibit less willingness to return to their home countries. Additionally, being female and being more proficient in the host country’s language are correlated with a decreased willingness to return to one’s home country. These findings likely reflect the differing opportunity structures available to refugees. Proficiency in the host country’s language suggests greater access to economic and social integration opportunities. Given Germany’s higher economic prosperity compared to Turkey, it likely offers more secure employment prospects. Moreover, the labor force participation rate for women is higher in both Germany and Turkey than in Syria according to International Labor Organization statistics.
### Table 4. Correlates and causes of intentions and willingness for return.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intentions for return</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Willingness for return</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment: Hostile discourse</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility in Discourse</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>0.09**</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.09**</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.09**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility in Discourse: Gov.</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility in Discourse: Opp.</td>
<td>−0.08***</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>−0.07**</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal Education</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07**</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>0.09**</td>
<td>0.09**</td>
<td>0.09**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>−0.04*</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.00</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since arrival</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.08***</td>
<td>0.07**</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni Muslim</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language proficiency</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>−0.06*</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>−0.05*</td>
<td>−0.07*</td>
<td>−0.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host country: Germany</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>−0.08*</td>
<td>−0.12**</td>
<td>−0.09**</td>
<td>−0.18***</td>
<td>−0.19***</td>
<td>−0.18***</td>
<td>−0.20***</td>
<td>−0.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1691</td>
<td>1641</td>
<td>1241</td>
<td>2522</td>
<td>2024</td>
<td>1762</td>
<td>1705</td>
<td>1273</td>
<td>2621</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001
Experimental analysis
We have not yet tested if the relationship between the perception of anti-refugee hostility in the political discourse and increased willingness to return is a causal one. We test this relationship through Models 4, 5, 9, and 10. Unlike political integration, we do not find any relationship between our treatment and the intentions and willingness to return to Syria. The statistical relationship is in the expected direction, but it does not pass the statistical significance threshold in any of our models.

Robustness checks
These results are robust for various definitions of the study sample. As presented in Appendix Section 4, we repeated the analysis by splitting the samples recruited from Turkey and Germany. The results are parallel in both countries. We also repeated the analysis by limiting our sample to respondents who completed the entire survey. This step only increased the statistical significance of our findings.

Conclusion
In countries hosting refugees, politicians increasingly employ hostile political discourses about them, often framing them as a threat on various grounds and demanding their immediate return. Our study demonstrates that these narratives are not without consequences, and they negatively influence refugees’ political attitudes and integration. Hostile discourse reduces refugees’ interest in host country politics and their willingness to participate. Our analysis suggests that the government’s discourse has the most significant impact on refugees’ political attitudes. Contrarily, we find that heightened hostility in political discourse does not significantly affect refugees’ intentions to return, aligning with existing literature emphasizing the influence of security conditions in the home country on return decisions (Alrababah et al. 2023; Arias et al. 2014).

We posit that increased political interest and willingness for political participation represent an openness toward engagement with the political system of a host country. Finding a strong cross-sectional relationship between the perceptions of political discourse and all three outcome variables also supports this idea. Collectively, our findings suggest that Syrian refugees respond to increased hostility in the political discourse by reducing their political interest and support for participation, but they do not consider leaving or exiting the system altogether. Refugees withdrawing or disengaging politically while simultaneously lacking good prospects for a return might lead to a limbo status or protracted refugee situation where refugees struggle to regain a degree of normalcy and agency to rebuild their lives. This highlights the need for comprehensive support mechanisms and interventions aimed at empowering refugees and fostering their meaningful integration into host countries.

This article represents one of the first efforts to study refugees’ political interests through an experimental design, yet it has certain limitations. One limitation of our experimental design is that our experimental conditions do not capture the entire breadth and diversity of the political discourses on refugees. We conceptualize political discourse on a continuum, extending from a very hostile discourse to a very welcoming one. However, we focus only on the two extremes of the continuum to test whether this continuum matters at all. We chose this design as our study was the very first conducted
on the topic, and we were unsure about the effect sizes we would find. Future research should explore how these effects change depending on the variations of political discourse. For example, it can explore whether we see a linear or non-linear effect as we go from hostile to welcoming political discourse. Researchers may also contrast a cohesively negative political discourse with a fragmented one where political parties adopt divergent positions on refugee issues.

A second limitation of our experimental design is that our outcome variables do not encompass the entire range of political behavior. We only measured political interest, willingness for political participation, and hypothetical turnout as we believe they are the most fundamental attitudes to understanding refugees’ political integration. However, future research may explore other forms of political participation that refugees engage in such as protesting, petitioning, voluntary political activism, self-organizing, contacting political offices, and consuming news.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that any single experiment will be limited in its ability to offer external validity. While we were able to show the causal impact of negative political discourse in an experimental setting, in real life, this factor may be counteracted by various other political dynamics and mechanisms, becoming irrelevant in terms of the effect size. We need more research testing the relationship between political discourse and refugees’ political attitudes, not only through experiments with different designs but also through other research methods, including both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Our findings and the importance of the topic justify further research.

Notes

1. Some Syrian refugees have already started to run for offices in host countries. For example, the southern German village of Ostelsheim elected Ryyan Alshebl – a Syrian refugee – as its mayor in 2023.
2. The Nation’s Alliance, also known as the Table of Six, was a coalition of ideologically diverse opposition parties formed before the 2023 Presidential elections and comprised the country’s main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), and the Good Party, an MHP splinter, the Islamist Felicity Party, Democrat Party, and two AKP splinter parties, the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and the Future Party (GP).
5. Registrations can be found here: https://osf.io/vm637 and https://osf.io/xrdm5/. This manuscript focuses on Hypotheses 1 and 2 in the pre-registration.
6. This divergence may be associated with differences in perceptions of political discourses. As mentioned above, Syrian refugees living in Germany also perceive political discourses to be more positive. The correlation between perceptions of political discourses and support for Syrian political participation is 0.17.
7. We thank the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this limitation of the study.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Jennifer Mitzen, Brent Steele, Bahar Rumelili, Umut Can Adisonmez, Ben Rosher, Alexandria Innes, Dmitry Chernobrov, Teri Murphy, Brooks Marmon, and Amr el Afifi for providing input on several aspects of this research project. Funding for this project was provided by the Mershon Center for International Security Studies and W.K. Kellogg Foundation.
The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio State. The IRB approval number assigned to it is 2022E0962.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work was supported by W. K. Kellogg Foundation; The Mershon Center for International Security Studies.

**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/T8YD38.

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