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From Conflict to Classroom: Refugee High School Students' Motivations for Emigration to Türkiye

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Abstract: This study explored the motivations of refugee high school students from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria for emigrating to Türkiye, with a particular focus on the city of Eskişehir. Unlike prior research that relies on adults' perspectives, this study amplifies the voices of the refugee youth themselves. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data was collected from 278 students via comprehensive questionnaires, and qualitative insights were obtained from in-depth interviews with 27 participants. Results indicate that civil wars, political instability, and economic hardships were primary drivers of emigration. Participants identified Türkiye's safety, cultural familiarity, educational opportunities, and health services as key pull factors. Decisions to settle in Eskişehir were often influenced by family choices and guidance from acquaintances, while established networks in their home countries facilitated chain migration. Qualitative interviews were used to elaborate and contextualize the primary drivers of emigration (e.g., war, safety) identified through the quantitative survey, providing a more nuanced understanding. It is the first to directly center refugee high school students' voices in Türkiye. By centering student perspectives in a non-English-speaking context, it offers novel empirical insights with important implications for research, policy, and educational practice.

Keywords: High school students, migration, migration theories, refugee, Türkiye

Migration, which occurs for different reasons in different geographical locations and is described as human mobilization with both individual and social dimensions, is a phenomenon that has been witnessed by all periods of history. "Migration, in simple terms, means that people go from one place to another permanently, where they settle and spend the rest of their life. To put differently, migration refers to the people's mobility towards other places by leaving the places they were born and raised" (Uslu Ak, 2021, p. 1749). The phenomenon of migration is a keystone in the studies carried out to understand the history of the world. From the first homo sapiens to the modern human, the phenomenon of migration has continued to be at the center

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of world history in various ways (Fisher, 2013; Martínez-Villar & Alaminos-Fernández, 2026). Current global migration movements are caused by adverse climatic conditions, famine, wars, socio-political/sectarian conflicts, and poor living conditions, as well as rational decisions to achieve better living standards (Ritzer, 2010, p. 314).

The rapid development of technology has changed the volume, speed and acceleration of migrations, and transportation systems have made it easier for almost all people to make rapid migration movements across continents. The global economic system fosters migration from poorer to wealthier societies, characterized by a "muscle drain" of manual workers and a "brain drain" of educated individuals (Fisher, 2013, p. 142). International migration is a dynamic and complex phenomenon driven by numerous factors, often resulting in challenges for social structures (Keskin & Okçu, 2021; Massey, et al., 1998). People embark on difficult migration journeys due to push factors in their home countries, seeking better lives in destination countries. Common push factors include ethnic tensions, wars, and conflict situations, contributing to the rise of millions of refugees (Fisher, 2013, p. 142). Additionally, factors such as climatic conditions and poor living standards can drive both individual and group migrations in search of a more viable life.

Migration is a dynamic phenomenon influenced by various contexts and conditions, evolving over time. Some scholars, like Uslu Ak (2021) and Yazan (2016), argue that migration will persist indefinitely. In contrast, Hagen-Zanker and Hennessey (2021) contend that labor shortages in emigrant countries will lead to a decline in migration rates and eventual saturation of migration networks, implying that migration is not a permanent condition. Amid these differing perspectives, a key insight is that Türkiye serves as both a destination and transit country for migration due to its strategic geopolitical position, acting as a bridge between three continents. Deniz (2014) emphasizes that Türkiye can be seen as an origin, destination, and transit country, reflecting its multifaceted role in global migration movements. According to Deniz (2014, p. 186), "being a country that produces immigration and sends people to other countries, Türkiye is an origin country, and Türkiye is considered a transit point or corridor for immigrants from different countries, especially those aiming to reach Europe or a third country. The fact that migrants having to leave their country for different reasons take refuge or settle in Türkiye to live there shows that it is also a destination country. Türkiye, a country that has received intense immigration from places such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East in the past, continues to be a migration route between Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. In the last thirty years, Türkiye has been one of the leading countries for (mostly child) immigrants from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Sub-Saharan Africa and Syria.

Due to the 2011 civil war that broke out in Syria, which Türkiye has the longest land border, millions of Syrians took refuge in Türkiye with the implementation of the Open-Door Policy, which is the policy implemented by the nearest border neighbor that refugees reach when they flee their country due to war, persecution and death (Karakoç Dora, 2020). The way in which Türkiye, which hosts the largest Syrian refugee population in the world, accepts Syrian refugees (officially called "Syrians under temporary protection") is shaped by factors such as religious values, cultural and historical proximity (Özbey, 2022). On the other hand, "the negative effects of the said policy started to become visible between the years 2014 and 2016, when Syrian refugees migrated to Türkiye en masse. The fact that people who were initially called 'guests' became 'permanent residents' today, "increased social criticism and forced Türkiye to review its policies" (Bayır & Aksu, 2020, p. 324). According to Özbey (2022, p. 723), "Türkiye's liberal immigration policy also had a significant impact on the Syrian migration to Türkiye and showed that migration movements are free and that borders are no longer an obstacle. With these two policies, Türkiye has become a country of migration that promotes human mobility at the global level." As such, Türkiye continues to be the "migration corridor" of individual or mass migration movements in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq,

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Iran and Syria, which makes it essential to be addressed in the light of the basic assumptions of migration theories.

Explaining Emigration to Türkiye in Light of Migration Theories

Each migration movement in the world has a unique story, and sometimes different motives lead to similar migrations. Migration is a complex phenomenon with various causes and consequences, and analyses of migration movements are based on diverse perspectives. International migration can be analyzed through macro, micro, and meso dimensions. The macro analysis suggests that migration increases when population density is high and employment opportunities are low while microanalysis points out that individuals often migrate to locations where relatives or friends reside or to familiar environments. The meso-analysis indicates that migrants make decisions by comparing conditions in their home country with those in their destination. Humanist approaches emphasize individual motivations for migration, while the capital increase approach focuses on wage considerations, and deterministic approaches examine the characteristics of immigrants (Faist, 2000; İnce, 2019; Parnwell, 2005). However, it is impossible to find a single theory that can explain migration in all its aspects with a cause-effect chain. Akyıldız (2016) notes that migration is an interdisciplinary field, which does not lend itself easily to typological distinctions.

This study explores Türkiye's role in international migration, positioning it as a key transit or destination country for refugees. Four main factors drive irregular migration to Türkiye: its strategic geographical location as a transit point for migrants heading to Western and Northern Europe; political instability and conflict in neighboring countries that *push* people to seek safer, more stable environments; increased border controls in Europe, which redirect migrants toward Türkiye as a gateway; and Türkiye's relatively stronger economic conditions compared to its neighbors, making it an attractive destination for those seeking better employment opportunities. These elements collectively shape Türkiye's significant position in migration patterns (Deniz, 2014; İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016; Polat, 2021). The migration theories adopted in this study—push-pull theory, migration network theory, world systems theory, intervening opportunities theory, and the laws of migration—offer a comprehensive, multi-layered explanation for refugee movements to Türkiye. While the push-pull theory addresses the immediate interaction between conflict-driven "pushes" from countries of origin and the "pulls" of safety and educational access in Türkiye, migration network theory clarifies how established social ties reduce the costs and risks of relocation, guiding families toward specific cities like Eskişehir. World systems theory situates these movements within a global economic framework, suggesting that Türkiye's role as a semi-peripheral hub makes it a strategic destination for those displaced by the structural disruptions occurring in peripheral regions. Complementing this, intervening opportunities theory highlights that a refugee's destination is determined by the presence of viable prospects encountered along the journey; if the opportunities in Türkiye are perceived as superior to the risks of further transit, the trajectory stabilizes there. Ravenstein's laws of migration (Grigg, 1977) suggest that most migration occurs in "steps" and is primarily directed toward major industrial and commercial centers. This explains why refugee students often move from border regions to central urban hubs that offer better long-term integration. These theories explain not only the initial impetus for migration but also the complex secondary settlement patterns that emerge in urban contexts. As Erkan (2021) notes, such a theoretical synthesis is essential for understanding Türkiye's pivotal role as a destination country and the resulting uneven distribution of refugee populations across Turkish cities.

Table 1
Theoretical Synthesis and Application of Migration Frameworks

Theory	Core Concept	Application to Refugee Students in Türkiye
Push-Pull	Interaction between factors driving individuals away from origins and drawing them toward destinations.	Conflict and insecurity in origin countries vs. perceived educational and healthcare access in Türkiye.
Migration Network	Use of social capital and existing community ties to facilitate movement.	Relocation to specific cities like Eskişehir based on existing family or friend support networks.
World Systems	Macro-economic structural displacement caused by global market expansion.	Displacement from peripheral nations to semi-peripheral hubs like Türkiye due to global structural shifts.
Intervening Opportunities	Migration decisions based on the quality of alternatives found between origin and intended destination.	Decision to settle in Türkiye after finding viable opportunities rather than attempting a risky transit to Europe.
Laws of Migration	Foundational principles including "step-migration" and movement toward industrial/urban centers.	Gradual movement from rural border areas toward Turkish urban educational centers.

Each of these theories brings an explanation for the migrations to Türkiye and helps us understand why immigrants prefer to immigrate to Türkiye, the reasons for their migration and why they chose Eskişehir where the fieldwork of this study was conducted. According to Erkan (2021), theories not only reveal why Syrians prefer Türkiye as their destination but also explain why they migrate to some Turkish cities more intensively. The current study focuses on the refugees who came to Türkiye from different countries and settled in Eskişehir. The field study revealed that the stories of refugee high school students concur with the basic assumptions of migration theories, but no single theory could explain these migrations definitively because, as İnce (2019, p. 2606) emphasizes, “the fact that the phenomenon of international migration takes different forms over time causes the theories that analyze migration movements to change as well. International migration is becoming increasingly heterogeneous and chaotic due to globalization.” The choices made by immigrants are influenced by political, social, cultural and economic factors, and even if they immigrate forcibly, they can still choose the cities in the destination countries (Erkan, 2021).

Temporary Protection

The civil war in Syria made thousands of people (mostly underage) leave their homes and seek refuge in Türkiye. Türkiye, which defines only asylum seekers from Europe as ‘refugees’, provides international protection under the status of ‘temporary protection,

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conditional refugee and subsidiary protection' in line with the restriction created by the geographical limitation. As regards "temporary protection, conditional refugee and subsidiary protection," an important legal regulation regarding the protection of immigrants and asylum seekers began to be implemented with the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (YUKK) in 2014. In addition, to coordinate the implementation of asylum and migration policies, the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) was established in Türkiye.

Temporary protection is a form of international protection that ensures the admission of individuals into a country, prohibits their return to danger, and guarantees the provision of basic needs. Türkiye's geographical reservation to the 1951 Refugee Convention creates a dual system for asylum seekers. Syrians fleeing the civil war that began in 2011 are granted temporary protection, while individuals from other countries may receive subsidiary protection or conditional refugee status. The latter is specific to Turkish law, allowing individuals to remain in the country until resettlement in a third country (Nurdoğan & Öztürk, 2018). Subsidiary protection is granted to individuals who do not qualify as refugees or conditional refugees but face risks such as torture, inhuman treatment, or threats to their lives upon return to their country of origin. However, these protections do not offer a pathway to long-term residence. According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, Türkiye recognizes individuals from outside the European continent as "conditional refugees." This recognition stems from Türkiye's adoption of a "geographical restriction" upon signing the Convention, allowing it to limit refugee status to those fleeing events within Europe. As a result, a "conditional refugee" is defined as someone seeking international protection in Türkiye, claiming refugee status due to events outside of Europe, with the intent to eventually be resettled in a third country. Türkiye grants shelter to these individuals until they can be relocated, offering them either "conditional refugee" or "subsidiary protection" status (YUKK article 63; Kahya Nizam & Sallan Gül, 2017). To strengthen its asylum system, Türkiye introduced legal and institutional reforms, notably with the enactment of the first national asylum law, YUKK, which came into effect in 2014 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). Consequently, individuals fleeing countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Syria are not classified as "refugees" under Turkish law, but as conditional refugees or those under subsidiary protection. Both a transit and destination country, Türkiye hosts about 2.9 million Syrian refugees (PMM, 2026) and over 258,000 asylum seekers (UNCHR, 2025), many of whom undertake perilous journeys due to decisions made by their families. More than 840,000 refugee children are studying at primary and secondary schools in Türkiye, and their school enrolment rate is about 78% (UNCHR, 2025).

The literature on immigrant students reveals a complex global landscape where academic resilience frequently clashes with systemic "social exclusion." Research emphasizes that educational experience is shaped not just by the students' abilities, but by the perceptions and biases of the stakeholders surrounding them. The integration of immigrant students into host educational systems is often hindered by a pervasive "deficit model" held by school staff. In the United States, Edwards et al. (2023) found that over half of community stakeholders believe immigrant parents are less likely to advocate for their children, a perception that can lead to reduced outreach and support. This professional bias is mirrored in the Turkish context, where Demirdağ (2024) utilizes social identity and social exclusion theories to show how immigrant students are frequently marginalized due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with local laws, and socio-economic instability. Turkish administrators report that while these students enrich the school climate, they are at a high risk of "detachment" or dropping out to pursue child labor due to economic pressures (Demirdağ, 2024).

This systemic vulnerability is further exacerbated by macro-level policies and societal rhetoric. Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al. (2024) highlights that schools serve as the gateway to host society, yet they are often ill-equipped to handle the acculturative stress and mental health inequities faced by newcomer students. Their research indicates that harsh immigration policies

and xenophobic rhetoric significantly damage student well-being, with a high percentage of principals reporting that such environments adversely affect learning outcomes. However, the literature also points to a path forward through "asset-based" approaches. By recognizing the "immigrant paradox," where these students often display higher academic resilience and fewer externalizing problems than native-born peers, schools can leverage cultural strengths like *familismo* and community networks to foster inclusion (Edwards et al., 2023; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024). The success of immigrant students ultimately depends on school administrators shifting from mere "resource allocation" to active "instructional leadership" that dismantles exclusionary barriers and validates the diverse social identities within their classrooms (Demirdağ, 2024).

Iraqi students in Türkiye face the dual challenge of overcoming severe war-related trauma while navigating a rigid higher education system. Research shows that while these students often exhibit posttraumatic growth following shared adversity, personal trauma can significantly hinder their psychological recovery (Kılıç et al., 2016). This recovery is further complicated by institutional barriers, such as strict attendance policies and language hurdles, which can leave migrant students feeling like outsiders within the Turkish university environment (Yilmazel & Atay, 2023).

Existing research on migration to Türkiye has largely focused on policy frameworks, adult refugees, labor market participation, and integration challenges (Bayır & Aksu, 2020; Özbey, 2022; Polat, 2021). While this literature provides important structural insights, the perspectives of refugee high school students remain underexplored. Yet adolescents experience migration in ways that differ significantly from adults, as they navigate schooling, language acquisition, identity formation, and future aspirations simultaneously (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Koyama & Bakuza, 2017).

The inclusion of migrant students in the Turkish national education system has transitioned from temporary Volunteer Education Centers to full integration into public schools, a shift that has created unique pedagogical and social challenges (Aras & Yasun, 2016). Recent studies highlight that the success of this integration is heavily dependent on culturally responsive teaching and the linguistic support provided to students. Yılmaz and Günel (2022) note that while physical access to schools has increased, pedagogical access is often blocked by the language barrier and a lack of specialized training for teachers in multicultural classrooms.

Furthermore, peer bullying and social distance emerge as significant hurdles in the Turkish school environment. Demir et al. (2025) and Eranıl and Kasalak (2024) suggest that refugee students often experience a "silent exclusion," where they are present in the classroom but remain socially isolated from their native peers. This isolation is linked to broader societal narratives and the "guest" status attributed to these populations, which can hinder the formation of a stable student identity during the critical period of adolescence. While Türkiye has made significant strides in enrolling refugee children, the transition from enrollment to meaningful social and academic integration remains fraught with difficulty. Adolescent refugees are particularly susceptible to the double burden of adapting to a new curriculum while simultaneously negotiating their identity in a host society that often views them through a lens of temporariness (Demir et al., 2025; Eranıl & Kasalak, 2024). This makes the high school environment in cities like Eskişehir a critical site for understanding the intersection of migration theory and educational practice.

Based on the relevant research and existing gap in literature, the following questions guided our study:

RQ1. What are the primary factors motivating refugee high school students from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria to emigrate to Türkiye?

RQ2. What factors influence refugee students' decisions to settle specifically in Eskişehir?

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RQ3. How do refugee high school students describe and make sense of their emigration experiences?

Method

Research Design

This study, which deals with the reasons why refugees prefer Türkiye as destination in the sample of refugee students studying at different high schools in Eskişehir, was conducted with the exploratory sequential design mixed method. The mixed method, which is built on the assumption that the researcher's combining quantitative data with qualitative data will provide more advantages than using either of these methods alone to better understand the problem of the research, is defined as a research approach that "collects both quantitative and qualitative data to understand it, integrates two data sets and then obtains results by taking advantage of the said integration" (Creswell, 2019, p. 2). In the explanatory sequential design (Quantitative → Qualitative), qualitative data are collected after quantitative data collection and analysis. This design was selected to address the study's dual aim of identifying dominant migration motivations and understanding how refugee students themselves interpret these experiences. Given the large and diverse refugee student population in Eskişehir, the quantitative phase enabled the researchers to establish the prevalence and relative importance of key push and pull factors across participants. However, motivations for forced migration are inherently complex, context-dependent, and emotionally charged, making them insufficiently captured through survey data alone. The subsequent qualitative phase was therefore designed to elaborate, clarify, and deepen the quantitative findings by foregrounding students' narratives of displacement, educational disruption, and settlement. This sequential approach allowed qualitative interviews to function as an interpretive extension of the survey results rather than as an independent strand, ensuring coherence between data sources. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, where qualitative themes were used to explain and contextualize quantitative patterns, providing a more comprehensive and youth-centered account of refugee migration experiences.

Table 2
Demographic Information of Students Participating in the Quantitative Part

Variables	Subcategory	N
Gender	Female	149
	Male	129
Total		278
Country of origin	Iraq	131
	Syria	106
	Iran	24
	Afghanistan	16
	Pakistan	1
Total		278

976 refugee students who came to Türkiye from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Syria and studying at high schools in Eskişehir constitute the study population of the research. The study employed mixed methods design to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). The sample group was determined using simple random sampling methods for the quantitative strand to ensure statistical representativeness (Teddlie & Yu, 2007), while purposive sampling was used for the qualitative

strand to select information-rich cases (Ames et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020). 278 students in the quantitative part (as shown in Table 2) and 27 students in the qualitative part (as shown in Table 3) formed the sample groups. Although Afghan students were proportionally fewer in the quantitative sample, they constituted a larger share of the qualitative interviews due to purposeful sampling aimed at capturing diverse migration trajectories and national contexts. While the quantitative sample (N=278) allows for a high degree of statistical confidence regarding the refugee student population in Eskişehir, the qualitative findings offer transferability to similar urban contexts in transit countries like Greece or Italy. The use of a sequential design ensures that the data is not only representative (quantitative) but also ecologically valid (qualitative), reflecting the lived realities of displaced youth in middle-income host nations.

Table 3

Demographic Information of Students Participating in the Qualitative Part

Variables	Subcategories	n
Gender	Male	19
	Female	8
Total		27
Country of origin	Iraq	14
	Afghanistan	9
	Iran	2
	Syria	2
Total		27

Data Collection

A researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 87 questions was used to collect quantitative data, and a semi-structured interview form with 43 questions was used for the in-depth interviews.

The questionnaire was developed specifically for this study rather than adapted from an existing standardized instrument, due to the absence of validated scales addressing refugee high school students' migration motivations in the Turkish context. Item content was informed by previous empirical studies on forced migration and refugee youth and reviewed by two experts in migration and education to establish content validity. A pilot administration with a small group of refugee students was conducted to assess clarity and comprehensibility, leading to minor revisions in wording prior to full use. It included four sections: (a) demographic information, (b) reasons for emigration from the country of origin, (c) reasons for choosing Türkiye and Eskişehir, and (d) perceived challenges during and after migration. The items were structured as multiple-choice and 5-point Likert-type statements (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree), allowing students to indicate the relative importance of various factors. Several items also provided space for brief written responses to capture additional explanations not covered by fixed options.

Qualitative data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol comprising 43 open-ended questions designed to elaborate on the survey findings. The protocol was developed iteratively, drawing on migration theories, prior refugee education research, and the results of the quantitative survey. Initial interview domains were informed by push–pull theory, migration network theory, and institutional perspectives, focusing on (a) experiences prior to emigration, (b) decision-making processes, (c) migration routes and social networks, (d) educational trajectories, and (e) settlement experiences in Türkiye and Eskişehir. Although the interview guide included 43 open-ended questions, these functioned as a flexible pool rather

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than a fixed script. Not all questions were asked of every participant; instead, interviews were adapted based on students' responses and relevance to their individual migration experiences. Core questions were consistently used across interviews, while additional prompts served as probes to elicit clarification or elaboration. This approach allowed for depth while minimizing participant burden. Interviews typically lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The interview protocol was reviewed by two experts in migration and education for content relevance and age appropriateness, and minor revisions were made following pilot interviews with two refugee students.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed according to the explanatory sequential design principles of the mixed method. Descriptive statistical calculations were made for quantitative findings, and overarching themes were created for the qualitative data. Quantitative and qualitative data sets were integrated in accordance with the completion, elaboration, and support principles of the mixed method. Data analysis followed a four-step process. In Step 1, quantitative survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify dominant push and pull factors. In Step 2, interview transcripts were coded inductively through repeated readings, generating initial codes grounded in participants' narratives. In Step 3, related codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting migration motivations, settlement processes, and post-migration challenges. In Step 4, qualitative themes were integrated with quantitative results during interpretation, allowing qualitative findings to elaborate statistical patterns and strengthen explanatory coherence.

Validity, Reliability and Rigor

The questionnaire and interview protocol were developed from relevant literature, reviewed by two experts for content validity, and piloted with refugee students to ensure clarity and appropriateness. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through inductive thematic analysis. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and direct quotations. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, where qualitative findings elaborated quantitative patterns, enabling triangulation. The study aims for analytical rather than statistical generalization; findings are transferable to similar contexts characterized by prolonged displacement and educational precarity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Anadolu University IRB (Approval no: 69682) prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants and, where required, from their legal guardians. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely. Given the vulnerability of the population, interviews were conducted with sensitivity to participants' emotional well-being, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

Results

We Migrated Because "We Have Our Reasons"

Table 4

Reasons for emigration from countries of origin

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
War	192	69.1
Familial	28	10.1
Political	25	9.0
Social pressure	16	5.8
Other	11	4.0
Financial	6	2.2
Total	278	100

As seen in Table 4, 192 of the refugee high school students who participated in the research stated that they migrated due to war, 28 due to family reasons, 25 political, 16 social pressure, 6 financial, and 11 for other reasons. This finding is in line with Acar Yurtman's (2017) study, which reports that "refugee children generally stated that they migrated due to factors arising from the civil war and increased security incidents". This is supported by Güzel's (2021) finding that although the situation and needs of people's families affect their decision to migrate, there are also different cultural, psychological, sociological or political factors shaping it. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain more detailed data on the reasons for the migration of refugee high school students. The analysis of student opinions showed that "security, social pressure, war, economic situation, education problems, health problems, political problems and political pressure" were the factors with the strongest emphasis, among the "push factors" in the migration literature. Some of the refugee students expressed why they migrated as follows: "They tried to kill us in Iraq. They had already killed my uncle. My mom brought us here because she was scared. My father was not interested in us anyway and left us. My mother brought us to Türkiye" (S20-F). "

Our situation in Afghanistan was somewhat good. My father was a military tailor. When the Taliban took over the state, they began to kill everyone. They started to force girls to marry if they were over the age of 15. Soo, we had to leave our country. (S4-F)

"My father was a garbage collector in Iran as he is here. My mother had to have surgery, they asked for a very high fee, and we couldn't afford it. That's why we decided to immigrate to Türkiye" (T27-M). Refugee high school students participating in the study are seen to have left their country of origin due to factors such as war, economic situation, security, social and political pressure, social discontent, and political instability.

Migration Route: "Türkiye as a Destination and Transit Country"

Table 5

Reasons to choose Türkiye as the destination country

Reason for choice	Frequency	Percentage
Being a safe country	175	35.9
Border neighborhood	73	15.0
Having similar culture	73	15.0
Presence of relatives/friends	62	12.7
Being the easiest way to cross into Europe	44	9.0
Attractive economic conditions	33	6.8

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Table 5
Continued

Finding a job easily	17	3.5
Other	10	2.1

Table 5 presents the reasons why refugee high school students in the study chose Türkiye as their destination country. Participants were allowed to select multiple responses, and the results show that 175 students preferred Türkiye because "it is a safe country," 73 selected "being border neighbors," and another 73 cited "having a similar culture." Other reasons included "strong health, education, and housing systems" (70 students), "connections to people living in Türkiye" (62 students), "ease of access to Europe" (44 students), "an easy asylum system" (34 students), "convenient economic conditions" (33 students), and "job availability" (17 students). 10 selected "other" as their reason. The responses suggest that Türkiye is viewed both as a transit and a destination country for refugees. The most common reason, "it is a safe country," is particularly significant given the civil strife and political instability in many of the students' home countries, with 84.5% of the sample (235 students) coming from these regions.

These findings also align with Ravenstein's principle of "migration and distance," which suggests that most migrants move short distances, creating potential for new migration waves (Grigg, 1977). This can be applied to the migration patterns to Türkiye from countries like Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Additionally, the preference of 62 refugee high school students for Türkiye due to "knowing people who live in Türkiye" reflects the "network theory," which posits that established social networks play a key role in encouraging migration. Once these networks are formed, they help maintain continuous migration flows, as the first migrants often guide and motivate others to follow. This phenomenon, known as "chain migration," is driven by social capital, including connections with relatives, friends, or acquaintances, which ease the migration decision. Furthermore, migration patterns often develop sequentially, with each wave encouraging the next. This process of chained migration supports the idea that migration is a gradual and ongoing process, which is also evident in the case of Syrians migrating to Türkiye due to factors such as safety, geographic proximity, and family ties.

The interviews also showed that pull factors such as "education, being a safe country, health, employment, transit country, border neighbor, Muslim" were highlighted. Some of the refugee high school students stated the following about the pull factors that affected their decision to choose Türkiye:

Why did we choose Türkiye? As I said, we had security problems, so we had to leave Afghanistan. We chose Türkiye as the first stop; we stopped here for a moment to think about whether to go further west. But it didn't happen, we stayed in Türkiye. (S1-M)

"My mom and dad chose Türkiye and Eskişehir. If we went to Iran, Iran would not grant citizenship to Afghans. That's why my family preferred Türkiye for our education and study" (S4-F). "We chose Türkiye to get a good education. Besides, we chose it because it is a Muslim country. We also chose it because people are nice (S5-M)."

As you know, we chose this place because Türkiye is the most beautiful country close to Iran. We did not think about Iraq and Syria. We are going through difficult times, at least we picked Türkiye so that we can have a better country and a better future. (S22-F).

Due to its geographical status, Türkiye is a country that is both a destination and a transit country, especially for people who set out from countries in Asia and the Middle East and who aim to reach European countries.

Why Eskisehir? "Charming and Highly Recommended"

215 of the participants said choosing Eskişehir was their family's decision, 63 said it was UN or the state's decision, and 17 said the decision maker was someone else.

Considering that the decision on the migration movement is mostly made by the household members, it would not be wrong to say that the elders of the family, not the children, have the last word in choosing Eskişehir. Thus, the decision of the family members becomes the decision of the child. In recent years, Türkiye has begun to develop settlement policies regarding immigrants, as reflected in the satellite cities model. Implemented as a solution, this model has played a crucial role in migration management, as "satellite cities are important centers that allow the relatively permanent guests of Türkiye to be accommodated." (Göktuna-Yaylacı, et al., 2017, p.102). Kahya Nizam and Sallan Gül (2017) state that the satellite city initiative is an accommodation and hosting policy unique to Türkiye, different from the approaches such as shelter, detention center or camp, which are the typical resettlement policies for refugee people in other countries. The satellite city model has gained favor in terms of security and the characteristics of immigrants, and the number of satellite cities, which was more than 20 at the beginning, reached 62. One of these satellite cities is Eskişehir. According to the current statistics of the PMM (2026), the number of Syrians living under temporary protection in Eskişehir is 6,668 and this number constitutes 0.78% of Eskişehir's population (906.617). The total number of people living in the province is 918,285. Syrians, who make up the largest number of refugees in Türkiye, are under temporary protection, and therefore they cannot apply for asylum in a third country and are not automatically placed in satellite cities.

Göktuna-Yaylacı, et al. (2017) report that the largest groups of refugees in Eskişehir come from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Burundi, and other African countries. The number of Iraqi refugees in Eskişehir notably increased when Iraqis who had sought refuge in Syria due to the Iraq War migrated to Türkiye following the onset of the Syrian Civil War. The first wave of Syrian refugees arrived in Eskişehir in early 2012, with some families of Circassian origin settling in Circassian villages and engaging in agricultural activities. Over time, these refugees spread throughout the city. Conditional refugees in Eskişehir are granted various rights, such as access to healthcare at local hospitals and the ability to attend school from pre-school to university, similar to local citizens. This makes Eskişehir an attractive destination city for refugees, especially for those seeking educational opportunities. Many participants in the study mentioned Eskişehir's "good educational conditions" and described the city as a "model city in education," a "university city," and "student-friendly," further reinforcing the city's appeal.

Interviews were held to understand in more detail the reasons why refugee high school students who came to Türkiye from countries such as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Syria and settled in Eskişehir prefer Eskişehir, and it was found that factors such as "job, decision of official institutions, health, advice of relatives and acquaintances" played a strong role. Therefore, as emphasized before, Eskişehir, which is described as a city of education, immigrants and students, is a city that continues to receive immigrants from various countries. Some of the refugee students interviewed expressed the following about why they chose Eskişehir to settle in: "We arrived in Van first. In Van, we were suggested to go to Eskişehir" (S3-M). "My aunt's friend was always talking highly about Eskişehir. A very beautiful city. She said there were (a lot of) students. That's why we chose this place" (S22-F). "My uncle lives in Eskişehir. He recommended it to us (S7-M)."

One of the main assumptions of the network theory is that the communication networks established by the immigrants ensure the continuation of the migration movements. The fact that the person(s) described as "pioneer immigrant(s)" continues to communicate with the people staying in the country of origin after settling in the destination country or city ensures keeping the migration chain active and determining the route of new migrations. Pioneer immigrants lead the way in the construction of immigrant networks with the relationships they

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have established with other immigrants and institutions, and in the process, they choose to bring their family members to the country they settled in through family reunification (Haug, 2008). In the current migration literature, migration is redefined based on cross-border social networks, as a phenomenon irreducible to households or individuals. Communities connected to each other by different types of social networks and relations perform migration movements (Ihlamur-Öner, 2018). The network theory is enlightened in the analysis of the views of refugee high school students because the network of relations facilitates the subjects of migration to prepare for the migration journey, settle in and adapt to the new social and cultural context. The efforts, initiatives and activities of immigrants enable the network of relations to be reproduced and strengthened in new contexts. In addition, people participating in migration movements do not only carry their accumulation, experience and human capital to the new society through these networks but also build their social capital there (Ihlamur-Öner, 2018). When analyzing the preference for Türkiye and Eskişehir, it is crucial to distinguish between the agency of the child and the decision of the household. The quantitative data shows that for 77.3% of the participants, the move was a family decision, rather than an individual preference. As participant S4-F noted, "My mom and dad chose Türkiye and Eskişehir... my family preferred Türkiye for our education." This indicates that for refugee high school students, the "motivation" to migrate is largely an inherited one, shaped by the parents' perceptions of safety and social capital. The preference expressed by the students in this study is, therefore, an after-the-fact alignment with their family's survival strategy.

The positive chracteristics of Eskişehir, which is a city in the Central Anatolia Region and borders the Aegean, Black Sea and Marmara Regions, such as "education, immigrant city, industry, security, health, social life" can be the most important sources of attraction and pull factors in pioneer immigrants' directing their relatives or acquaintances to Eskişehir.

Participants reported about their unaccompanied journey under harsh conditions often without eating or drinking and described how human smugglers took advantage of their families in their struggle to reach Türkiye. Their narratives highlighted "transport, payment, transfer, human smugglers, and provision of temporary accommodation," aligning with the basic assumptions of the institutional theory. They frequently mentioned factors such as "paying money to human smugglers, being unaccompanied, feeling distressed, cold, tired, and scared" that point to this theory as well. Some of the refugee high school students interviewed stated the following about the problems they experienced during their migration:

We lived in the capital where the Taliban is located. We walked day and night non-stop for a month. We climbed mountains. We crossed streams. We walked non-stop for 24 hours. In fact, others left the country with us, and some people died of a heart attack on the way here. We asked the smugglers for help. We also got on vehicles from time to time, but we walked most of the way. This difficult journey took about a month and a half. (S4-F)

We came here illegally. The smugglers helped us. It was very difficult. We were in the smugglers' car. They shot at the car. Smoke and fire came out of the car. We got out of the car and ran before the car exploded. We crossed waters and rivers. My brother fell into the water, although the water was very deep and my brother could not swim, thankfully he was able to get out of the water at the last moment. The weather was very cold, I don't know if it was below zero at night, but it was freezing. (S27-M)

The refugee high school students interviewed said that after arriving in Türkiye, they initially faced problems such as "adjustment to education, accommodation, exclusion and social cohesion". Immigrant solidarity networks appear to have an important contribution to alleviate the problems that immigrants initially encounter in the country/society they have just joined. It is possible to compare these networks to "an invisible social contract that shapes the relationship between immigrants and their social and cultural environments, or a safety net that helps immigrants survive during the difficulties they experience during the migration process (Thieme, 2014). In addition, these social networks have the function of reducing the material

and moral costs and risks of migration (Abadan-Unat, 2002; Haug, 2008), and the shock-absorbing function in the process of social or economic crises (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2018), with a vital role for immigrant people (Ihlamur-Öner, 2018). This was reflected in the interviews as follows:

In the beginning it was very difficult to find a house. We stayed at my uncle's house for a month. My uncle also helped us financially, helped us find a house, God Bless him. Also, we had a lot of difficulties in language and understanding at the beginning. (S7-M)

We did not speak the language, and we lost our money during the migration. I was 11 years old, but because we didn't have any money, I went to work with my family. We went to a factory to work because our situation was very bad. They had taken our money, everything. I worked in textile for a few months. After that, we had a neighbor. He said Zehra (me) needs to go to school. He enrolled me in school. God Bless his soul for buying all my school supplies for me. We first encountered these problems. (S23-F)

It is important to recognize that immigrants moving to a new society are likely to encounter various challenges. These challenges, often compounded by initial disadvantages, can make settling into the new society even more difficult. Some of the refugee high school students interviewed told the following about the problems they faced after arriving in Türkiye:

Since we are Syrians, they frowned upon us at the beginning, they were saying some insulting slurs. They have gotten used to it over time but still asked why we had come. I was an apprentice in the industry, both a 20-year-old man and a 40-year-old man asked me that question. I remember going to the restroom there and crying. (S15-M)

In the beginning we had language and communication problems. Being an immigrant is very difficult. You don't know what to do. You don't speak the language, it's very difficult. We did not know anything like where the hospital was, or where the bread was sold. We were very scared. My father was also very scared at first. We had no place to stay, for example, we rented a detached and very bad house with a high rent. All of this happened because we did not speak the language. (S24-F)

In summary, the perspectives of refugee high school students on their reasons for migrating, choosing Türkiye and Eskişehir, and the challenges they faced complement the quantitative data. These findings underscore that migration is shaped by both push and pull factors, with refugees often encountering difficulties in host countries, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of the migration experience.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined refugee high school students' motivations for emigration to Türkiye and settlement in Eskişehir using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The most significant findings indicate that students' migration decisions were primarily shaped by war, political instability, and economic hardship, while Türkiye's perceived safety, geographical proximity, cultural familiarity, and access to education and health services emerged as key pull factors. Students' narratives reveal that migration is less driven by abstract aspirations than by pragmatically constrained educational, economic, and civic futures.

These findings align with previous research documenting forced displacement as a response to violence and instability (Engelhardt, 2016) but extend the literature by centering refugee adolescents' own voices rather than adult perspectives. While earlier studies emphasize macro-level drivers of migration, this study contributes empirically by illustrating how young people interpret these structural forces through lived experiences such as fleeing gangs, navigating smugglers, and relying on family networks. In doing so, it highlights the educational dimension of migration decision-making, an area that remains underexplored in refugee youth research. The dominance of war as a "push" factor aligns with the findings of Aydin and Kaya (2019), who note that this displacement results in "disrupted schooling" and deep-seated

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trauma. While 62.9% cited "Safety," qualitative data suggests this safety is physical rather than psychosocial. Aydin and Kaya (2019) argue that Turkish schools, while secure, often lack the "comprehensive psychosocial support" to address the trauma students carry. Furthermore, our analysis of "similar culture" (26.3%) is significantly deepened by Bektas et al. (2025), whose work on Syrian Turkmens reveals a "kinship paradox" where shared ethnic ties do not automatically result in inclusive education, but rather a "misrecognition of identity" (Bradley & Churchill, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, the results both confirm and extend existing migration frameworks. Push–pull theory is supported by the prominence of conflict-related push factors and safety-oriented pull factors. Migration network theory is reinforced by students' reliance on family and acquaintances when choosing destinations, often outweighing formal policy considerations. Institutional perspectives are extended by demonstrating how informal actors (e.g., smugglers, temporary shelters) mediate migration trajectories, revealing layered pre-migration, migration, and post-migration experiences.

Using the sequential explanatory mixed methods design provided a unique vantage point that a single-method study could not achieve. The quantitative phase allowed for a macro-level identification of dominant migration drivers, establishing that geographical proximity and safety were statistically the most significant pull factors for the Eskişehir sample. However, the value of the qualitative phase was in its ability to flesh out these statistics; while the survey identified "war" as a variable, the student narratives transformed this data into lived experiences of fleeing gangs and political persecution. The relatively strong presence of Afghan participants in the qualitative phase allowed for deeper exploration of migration narratives shaped by prolonged instability distinct from the Syrian civil war context. There was a high degree of agreement between the closed-ended survey responses and the semi-structured interviews regarding the role of "cultural similarity" as a destination driver. However, the sequential nature of the study also presented limitations. Because the qualitative phase was designed to explain the quantitative results, the initial focus was heavily weighted toward the researcher's pre-defined theoretical categories. This quantitative-first approach may have narrowed the initial scope of the students' stories, though the subsequent focus groups successfully reclaimed the "post-migration" nuances that the surveys initially overlooked.

The findings of the present study, particularly the emphasis on safety, cultural familiarity, and access to education as primary pull factors, resonate strongly with emerging scholarship on refugee integration in Türkiye. Kotluk and Kocakaya (2018) demonstrate that a large majority of teachers in Türkiye view culturally relevant/responsive education (CRE) as both necessary and effective in contexts marked by cultural diversity, suggesting that the educational pull identified by refugee students in this study may be reinforced by an emerging pedagogical awareness within Turkish schools. At the same time, the students' emphasis on social networks and familiarity aligns with Giovanis et al.'s (2024) finds that sociocultural participation and cross-community relationships significantly enhance migrants' subjective well-being, highlighting that integration is not merely institutional but relational. However, the structural constraints described by participants—such as uncertainty, economic precarity, and uneven access to services—also echo Fansa and Sayıcı's (2025) conclusion that host countries, including Türkiye, often lack a fully holistic integration model in refugee education (Starkowski, 2022). These studies support and extend our findings by showing that refugee students' motivations are shaped not only by immediate safety concerns but also by expectations of educational inclusion, sociocultural belonging, and long-term integration opportunities.

While Türkiye is lauded as a "safe country" (62.9%), this study highlights that safety is often experienced as "conditional." For these students, the "pull" of Türkiye is not merely physical protection but the potential for educational continuity. However, as established by Aydin & Kaya (2019), this continuity is often threatened by a pervasive "language barrier" and

a lack of psychosocial support, which risks turning the school from a site of integration into a site of "marginalized neglect." Several key factors influence refugee high school students' preference for Türkiye, particularly Eskişehir. These include Türkiye's perception as a safe country, its geographical proximity, cultural similarities, access to shelter, health and education services, the presence of familiar individuals, and family decisions. These elements were corroborated by the perspectives of refugee students involved in both the quantitative and qualitative components of our study. The reasons why refugee high school students prefer Türkiye can be summarized and explained based on five migration theories, as given in Table 6 below.

Table 6
Immigrants' Reasons for Choosing Türkiye and the Theory That Explains These Reasons

Reasons why immigrant groups choose Türkiye as destination	**Explanatory theories**
Immigrant groups have the opportunity to spread to Turkish cities	Laws of Migration
The short distance between Türkiye and Syria and between Türkiye and Iran	Laws of Migration, Intervening opportunities, and Push-and-pull
Desire for better life standards	World systems, Push-and-pull, and Intervening opportunities
The civil war in Syria and the political instability in Afghanistan Economic problems Possibility of emigrating to the Europe Possibility of settling in cities in Türkiye without permission Opportunity to return temporarily at any time	Push-and-pull
Türkiye's 'open door policy'	Push-and-pull, Intervening opportunities
Various aids from Türkiye	Push-and-pull, Intervening opportunities
Türkiye's position on the transit migration route	Laws of Migration, Push-and-pull, Intervening opportunities, World Systems
Having social networks in Türkiye's cities	Migration network theory

This study contributes novel empirical evidence by foregrounding refugee high school students' perspectives in a non-English-speaking context and demonstrates how education operates simultaneously as a source of hope and a site of structural constraint. Understanding refugee youths' motivations as rational responses to uncertain futures offers a more humane foundation for policy and practice. The findings also offer broader implications for international education and migration policy. For readers in Europe or East Asia, this study highlights that safety is not a monolithic concept; it is gendered and age dependent. Furthermore, our study demonstrates that social networks (Network Theory) are more influential than official government policy in determining where refugees settle. This suggests that global host nations should focus on family-reunification and community-building programs rather than isolated

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settlement camps to ensure the successful integration of refugee youth. Governments should prioritize the "satellite city" model to promote social cohesion and ensure that education systems move beyond language instruction to address the psychosocial consequences of war-related trauma.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study captures a specific group of refugee students in one Turkish city and reflects a single moment in their migration trajectories. While the mixed-methods design allowed for analytical generalization, findings are not statistically generalized. Building on these limitations, future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative designs to examine how the initial quantitative pull factors found here actually translate into long-term qualitative integration success as these youth enter the Turkish workforce and how refugee motivations differ between transit contexts such as Türkiye and destination countries in Western Europe. Further, future studies could also use Spatial Narrative Mapping by merging the physical routes identified in migration stories with digital mapping tools to visualize the "institutional friction" refugees face. As we look toward the future, the success of refugee integration will not be measured by enrollment numbers alone, but by the extent to which these "strangers at our door" are transformed into recognized, valued, and hopeful members of a shared society. Prioritizing the narratives of refugee youth is not just an empirical necessity; it is a moral imperative to ensure that the "refugee revolution" results in a revolution of inclusion rather than a legacy of exclusion

Authors' Contributions

Both authors made an equal contribution to literature review, research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation.

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Informed Consent form

Informed consent was explicitly obtained from all participants or from their legal representatives.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset is available at https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/ptzmgsksy9/1

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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