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Encounters at the Edge: When Contact Builds Bridges or Barriers in Refugee-Receiving Countries

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ABSTRACT

Policymakers often assume that interactions between host society members and immigrants will promote integration. However, scholars caution against such assumptions, considering both contact theory's optimism and group threat theory's concerns. In the present study, we examine a series of hypotheses pertaining to intergroup contact and group threat theories, utilising data collected from Istanbul, Türkiye. Ordered logistic regression models are employed to examine how contact and threat dynamics affect integration perceptions. Findings indicate that the quality and site of intergroup contact, rather than its quantity, significantly influence host community members' perceptions of refugee integration and Syrians' self-perceptions of their integration. Furthermore, threat perceptions significantly affect integration perceptions while intergroup contact moderates the impact of threat perception.

1 | Introduction

Policymakers widely anticipate that interaction between members of the host society and immigrants/refugees will facilitate integration (Valenta and Bunar 2010). Scholars, however, are more cautious regarding the anticipated positive outcomes of interactions between host societies and newcomers. While foundational studies express optimism that intergroup contact could diminish prejudice under “optimal conditions” (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998), some argue that the uncritical adoption of this thesis in policy-making regarding the integration of immigrants and refugees has been excessive (Matejskova and Leitner 2011, 720). Conversely, another strand of research, influenced by group threat theories (Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967), adopts a relatively pessimistic viewpoint, suggesting that intergroup contact can amplify perceived group threats, thereby exacerbating conflicts (Stephan et al. 2005).

Understanding the impact of interpersonal contact is particularly crucial in refugee-hosting societies (Ghosn et al. 2019; Mahmoud 2011). In such contexts, superficial interactions pose the risk of exacerbating intercommunal conflicts and violence (Cin et al. 2021). While policies aimed at preventing refugees from becoming entangled in societal conflicts are essential, implementing such policies without fostering meaningful interactions between host and refugee communities may inadvertently isolate refugees in enclaves, thereby impeding their integration into broader society (Goodman and Kirkwood 2019). Against this backdrop, this article explores how the types and sites of contact experiences influence perceptions of integration, and how these dynamics are shaped by threat perceptions between members of the host society and refugees.

In our analysis, the dependent variable is *perceptions of integration* rather than integration itself, as refugees are often seen as

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temporary residents, creating policy uncertainty unlike regular migrants, whose path to full integration is clearer (Feller 2006, 515). Additionally, the public discourse on refugees also shifts over time from viewing them as victims in need to perceiving them as cultural and economic threats (Lawlor and Tolley 2017). Finally, in Türkiye, where our data was collected, discussing Syrian refugees' integration remains premature due to their relatively recent arrival. Indeed, the influx of refugees into Türkiye dates back to 2012 and 2013, shortly after the onset of the civil war in Syria. Still, examining both host and refugee perceptions offers insights into evolving intergroup attitudes and medium-term integration experiences.

To explore the factors influencing perceptions of integration, we utilise data from Türkiye, a significant host and transit country for refugees, particularly in the aftermath of the escalation of the civil war in Syria in 2011, as well as ongoing violence and instability in Afghanistan and Iraq (Icduygu and Aksel 2021). Türkiye hosts the world's largest refugee population (UNHCR 2020), with 3,763,686 Syrians under "temporary protection" as of 2021 (Presidency of Migration Management 2024). This rapid influx has fueled political and social tensions, occasionally leading to violence, whether in the form of individual crimes or mob attacks.¹ While studies highlight the economic, psychological, and social challenges faced by Syrian refugees (e.g., Kaya 2020), surveys indicate that nearly 80% of Turkish citizens in Istanbul hold negative views on the contribution and integration of Syrian refugees, with 84% supporting their repatriation (Doğan et al. 2021, 91). As Türkiye's largest city and the primary host of Syrian refugees, Istanbul serves as a critical case for examining the dynamics of contact and conflict in refugee integration.

In the present study, we begin by discussing theoretical arguments on intergroup contact and group threat theories, formulating hypotheses tested through ordered logistic regression models using data from Istanbul. Our analysis includes both Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees, examining the effects of contact and threat dynamics on integration perceptions. While prior research has explored intergroup contact quality, our study contributes in three ways. First, unlike most studies that focus solely on either the host society or newcomers, we analyse both groups for the same variables, aiming to understand the interdependent nature of contact and conflict dynamics. Second, we compare contact outcomes across qualitatively different sites such as workplace, neighbourhood, public transportation, cultural activities, or mosque, a comparison that has not been explored in previous studies to our knowledge. Third, we focus specifically on perceptions of integration rather than general intergroup attitudes. Unlike studies on discriminatory practices (Lenz and Mittlaender 2022; Whitt et al. 2021) or highly skilled immigrant integration (Verkuyten 2016), we test the hypotheses of contact and threat theories regarding integration perceptions. As noted, host and refugee perspectives on integration provide insight into emerging inclusion or exclusion scenarios in the short and medium term.

2 | Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Theories on contact outcomes can be categorised into two directions: those influenced by the intergroup contact model and those aligned with the group threat model. According to the intergroup

contact model, having contact with the members of the outgroup would modify prejudice and anxiety between groups but only under some facilitative conditions (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2005). These conditions are usually operationalised under four categories: (1) equal status, (2) authority support, (3) common goals, and (4) cooperation (Pettigrew 1998). Interestingly, even in the absence of Allport's conditions, there is a substantial consensus among scholars regarding the validity of contact theory (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Lemmer and Wagner (2015) further argue that intergroup contact programmes not only reduce prejudice toward individuals and the involved outgroup but also toward unspecified ethnic outgroups. Applying the intergroup contact approach to immigration and refugee studies, numerous research findings suggest that contact with newcomers fosters positive attitudes toward them by diminishing prejudice and, consequently, promoting the integration of immigrants and refugees (e.g., Çırakoğlu et al. 2020; Di Bernardo et al. 2021; Lutterbach and Beelmann 2020; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; McLaren 2003; Pettigrew et al. 2007; Tropp et al. 2018).

However, a closer examination of the literature reveals that the outcome of contact depends not only on quantity but also on the type, quality, and context of the contact. Expanding on the distinction between positive and negative contact, Tropp et al. (2018, 42) provide strong evidence that frequent and "friendly contact experiences" predict greater inclinations to welcome newcomers and feeling welcomed by other groups, ultimately facilitating processes of social integration. According to Windzio and Bicer (2013), the friendliness of contact also varies in levels determined by the costs of ties. They argue that in lower-cost situations (e.g., being classmates), intergroup boundaries are less effective compared to higher-cost situations (e.g., spending leisure time together, visiting each other's homes), suggesting that site of contact contributes significantly to integration (Windzio and Bicer 2013, 126). Similarly, Lutterbach and Beelmann (2020, 149) contend that "positive intergroup contact," by fostering an understanding of "shared reality," helps establish a social foundation that is inclusive and conducive to integration. Still, as Verkuyten (2016) argues, even positive contact may have negative effects, particularly for highly educated and qualified immigrants, who compare themselves with similarly educated and qualified members of the host society. Nonetheless, in general, contact researchers tend to conclude that while random intergroup contact may not necessarily reduce prejudice or negative attitudes, the "richness" or "valence" of the contact significantly influences outcomes (De Coninck et al. 2021, 890). Some studies arrived at similar conclusions for the Turkish case. For example, Firat and Ataca (2022) found that quality of contact predicts support for refugee rights, Çalışkan Sari and Yalçinkaya Alkar (2023, 264) propose that "high-quality social contact" is a significant predictor of positive attitudes toward Syrians, or Özkan et al. (2021), concluded that positive contact is linked to a reduced intention to return to their country among Syrian refugees, which is attributed to decreased perceptions of discrimination and increased identification with the host society.

While many studies concur that the quality of contact is more crucial than the quantity of contact, there remains the question of how such positivity can be achieved. According to Di Bernardo et al. (2021, 12), Allport's "optimal conditions are

still key to promoting positive contact.” Focusing on workplace contact, where Allport’s optimal conditions are more likely to be present, Di Bernardo et al. (2021) conclude that these conditions “act as a precursor for positive contact” for both minority and majority workers. This, in turn, fosters positive intergroup behaviours not only within the workplace but also outside the contact situation and toward the broader outgroup. Therefore, we expect that the site of contact may play a crucial role in shaping the effects of intergroup interactions. Specifically, contact occurring in settings that allow for quality interactions is more likely to foster positive attitudes toward the outgroup compared to contact in sites characterised by superficial or incidental encounters.

Based on the initial review of research on intergroup contact, we propose the following set of hypotheses:

H1. *The frequency of intergroup contact between the members of the home society and refugees is positively related to perceptions of integration among both groups.*

H2. *The quality of intergroup contact between the members of the home society and refugees is more positively related to perceptions of integration among both groups than that of the frequency of intergroup contact.*

H3. *The contact in sites that facilitate higher-quality interaction and positive engagement is more strongly associated with affirmative perceptions of integration among both groups than the contacts in sites where superficial and arbitrary encounters occur.*

The discussion surrounding facilitative conditions prompts us to consider arguments from the group threat theory, which focuses on contexts where optimal conditions are absent. According to this theory, intergroup contact between locals and immigrants/refugees can exacerbate conflict as group members perceive threats to their identities or material well-being, especially under competitive conditions, among low-income groups, and in the presence of a large number of immigrants/refugees (De Coninck et al. 2021; Meuleman et al. 2009; Schlueter et al. 2013; Stephan et al. 2009). Additionally, attributing cultural superiority to one’s own ethnic group is related to perceiving newcomers as a threat (Firat and Ataca 2022; Ho 1990). In such cases, the perception of integration is negatively impacted, as the standard for integration is elevated to cultural assimilation. To operationalise threat perceptions, the literature tends to categorise threats into two groups, such as “realistic” and “symbolic” (McLaren 2003; Stephan et al. 2009), or “economic” and “cultural” threats (Schlueter et al. 2013).

In the framework of realistic threat perception, members of the dominant societal group often harbour antagonistic sentiments toward minority groups perceived as posing both collective and individual threats in terms of safety and competition for resources, such as employment opportunities, access to services, and social welfare provisions (Blumer 1958). As McLaren (2003, 916) argues, the context is crucial, as the fear of competition for resources is more likely to be triggered in poor economic conditions and when the immigrant/refugee population is large. Symbolic (or cultural) threats, on the other hand, pertain to perceived challenges to identity, norms, beliefs, and lifestyles, and

this perception of threat becomes particularly relevant in the presence of culturally distant migrant/refugee groups (Callens et al. 2015; McLaren 2003). Overall, high levels of threat perceptions, whether realistic or symbolic, are strongly correlated with negative attitudes toward newcomers. However, these effects are moderated by certain sociodemographic characteristics, such as being younger and having higher levels of education (De Coninck et al. 2021, 892; Yuk and Shin 2024, 12).

To what extent contact reduces threat perceptions? The literature strongly supports the argument that both feelings of realistic and symbolic threats decrease significantly with outgroup contact in the form of friendship, whereas random contact has minimal influence on threat perceptions (De Coninck et al. 2021, 890; McLaren 2003, 927). Additionally, Rodon and Franco-Guillen (2014) argue that workplace contact with immigrants reduces negative attitudes among the host society, even in contexts of higher unemployment. According to McLaren (2003, 927), having more friends from minority groups significantly reduces threat perceptions, even in the presence of a large number of foreigners. Examining the adverse context of recent refugee crises in the EU, Knappert et al. (2021) find that personal contact between members of the host society and refugees diminishes negative prejudices, even among right-wing citizens. Also, Schlueter et al. (2013) suggest a negative association between permissive integration policies that support more intergroup contact and threat perceptions. Therefore, amidst adverse circumstances that heighten perceptions of threat, interpersonal contact and policies supporting it have the capacity to mitigate this effect.

Concerning the effects of context, while Schneider (2008) argues that differences in anti-immigrant attitudes across European countries are not significantly related to economic and social competition between the host society and newcomers, group threat theory posits that latent prejudices become more apparent, and locals’ perception of threat increases as the immigrant population grows in their neighbourhoods (Savelkoul et al. 2011) or structural conditions such as a country’s economic situation are not in good shape (Schlueter and Scheepers 2010). Additionally, competition may escalate hostility between groups, especially among those with lower socioeconomic status in terms of income and education (Simon 1987). However, Meuleman (2011, 294–295) suggests that anti-immigration attitudes are more likely a response to perceived rather than actual economic threats. He highlights the strongest correlation between negative attitudes and perceived threat in European countries with relatively high GDP per capita, contrasting those at the lower end of the GDP per capita ranking. Nevertheless, when low GDP per capita coincides with a high unemployment rate, the average level of perceived economic threat is likely to escalate (Meuleman 2011, 307). Conversely, when considering the impact of interpersonal contact, threat perception diminishes among individuals who have immigrant friends or colleagues (Meuleman 2011, 296). In summary, under unfavourable structural conditions, heightened threat perception tends to foster negative attitudes toward newcomers, but these effects are mitigated by positive contact, particularly in the form of friendship or workplace relationships.

Türkiye, characterised by a high influx of Syrian refugees, challenging economic conditions, and predominantly

superficial intergroup contact (Doğan et al. 2021, 96–99), emerges as a highly pertinent case for testing group threat hypotheses. According to Getmansky et al. (2018), Turks with high levels of exposure to refugees in their daily lives tend to hold more negative views and perceive them as a greater threat. Nevertheless, their study does not differentiate the intensity and type of contact. Recent studies about Türkiye highlight how perceptions of threat and cultural distance moderate the relationship between contact and prejudice. For instance, Çırakoğlu et al. (2020, 2996) argue that threat perception “fully” mediates the relationship between contact and negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees. Ünver et al. (2022) also argue that positive contact with the primary outgroup (Turks and Kurds) predicts more favourable attitudes toward Syrians. Turkoglu et al. (2023), however, found that Kurds, recognised as an oppressed group in Türkiye, are less inclined to perceive Syrians as a sociocultural threat, but rather as an economic one despite having greater contact with them.

Concerning these debates around group threat approach, we hypothesise the following:

H4. *There is a negative relationship between threat perceptions (both realistic and symbolic) and perceptions of integration among both groups.*

H5. *There is a negative relationship between the quality of contact (and contact in sites that facilitate higher-quality interaction and positive engagement) and the perceptions of threat.*

3 | Data and Methods

We draw on secondary data of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality for this analysis with granted permission to the authors of this article. The data for the analyses comes from the two simultaneous survey studies conducted in early 2020 in Istanbul. The two studies were conducted separately on representative samples of Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees residing in Istanbul. The sample size is 1233 for citizens and 1166 for Syrians. The main dependent variable, perception of integration, was taken directly from the surveys. Turkish citizens were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement, “How integrated are Syrians residing in Istanbul to society?” using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not integrated at all) to 5 (very integrated). Similarly, Syrian respondents were asked, “How integrated do you think you are in Turkish society?” using the same Likert scale. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variable and all other variables are presented in Table 1.

Control variables in our analysis include age, gender (with a dummy variable for males), education level, and monthly income. Education is included in our models as a dummy variable for respondents with college education or higher. Monthly income was measured using a 17-category scale, grouped into brackets to prevent missing data among high-income participants. Since these brackets were not suitable for treating income as a continuous variable, a dummy variable was created for income levels twice the monthly national minimum wage

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Turkish citizens				
To what extent are Syrians living in Istanbul integrated into the local society?	1.78	1.03	1	5
Age	40.46	15.05	18	83
Gender (Male = 1)	0.51	0.50	0	1
College or above education	0.14	0.35	0	1
Medium and high income	0.21	0.41	0	1
Contact in nonoptimal locations	4.58	1.16	1	6
Contact in optimal locations	2.78	1.59	1	6
Having Syrians in close social circle	0.21	0.41	0	1
They take our jobs since they work for lower wages	0.84	0.36	0	1
They are a burden on welfare system of our country	0.80	0.39	0	1
Increase in the Syrian population will negatively impact Turkish culture	0.72	0.44	0	1
Istanbul has been Arabicized	0.74	0.43	0	1
Since the arrival of Syrians my neighbourhood has become less safe	0.54	0.49	0	1
Crime rate has increased in my neighbourhood because of Syrians	0.47	0.49	0	1
Syrians				
To what extent do you feel like you have been integrated into the Turkish society?	3.36	1.10	1	5
Age	32.50	11.11	18	95
Gender (Male = 1)	0.53	0.49	0	1
College or above education	0.09	0.29	0	1
Medium and high income	0.09	0.30	0	1
Years since arriving in Türkiye	5.35	1.69	0	10

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Contact in nonoptimal locations	2.71	2.01	0	8
Contact in optimal locations	0.77	0.82	0	4
Having Turkish friends	0.38	0.48	0	1
Interaction with Turkish neighbours	0.35	0.47	0	1
My economic condition will be worse a year from now	0.38	0.49	0	1
Experienced exploitation of labor	0.59	0.49	0	1
Youth distancing themselves from Syrian culture is a problem	0.06	0.24	0	1
Unable to maintain the customs in Syria	0.32	0.46	0	1
I feel unsafe in the neighbourhood I live in	0.05	0.23	0	1

and above. Additionally, the total number of years since arrival in Türkiye was included as a control variable in the models for Syrian respondents.

Our analysis categorises independent variables into contact and threat perception variables. Contact variables measure frequency, quality, and location, encompassing 12 distinct contact sites. Based on theoretical and empirical considerations, we classify these sites into two categories: those that facilitate relatively higher-quality interaction and positive engagement (meeting at least two of Allport's optimal conditions) and those characterised by superficial and arbitrary encounters. The latter include neighbourhoods, streets, hospitals, restaurants/café, public transportation, shopping areas, city parks, and social media. As discussed in the theoretical section, superficial and arbitrary encounters are more likely to heighten economic and cultural threat perceptions, leading to negative evaluations of refugees. Moreover, findings from in-depth interviews conducted as part of a related study indicate that both Turkish and Syrian participants frequently reported negative experiences in Istanbul's overcrowded parks, hospitals, and public transportation. They also noted that the rapid increase in the Syrian population has led to their unwelcome presence in neighbourhoods, streets, and shopping areas (Doğan et al. 2021). Conversely, workplace, school, mosque, and cultural activities are classified as settings that facilitate higher-quality interaction and positive engagement. Drawing on Allport's optimal conditions, we suggest that common goals, cooperation, and authority support foster meaningful interactions in workplaces and schools, while equality and common goals play a similar role in mosques and cultural activities. The literature further supports this distinction, with studies indicating that workplace interactions help reduce negative attitudes (Rodon and Franco-Guillen 2014), while

sustained engagement in school settings fosters greater friendliness (Windzio and Bicer 2013).

For contact location, Turkish citizens were surveyed about the frequency of contact with Syrians in 11 different settings (social media was not included for Turks), using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (every day). An arithmetic average was calculated for both types of locations, creating a continuous variable ranging from 1 to 6. Additionally, citizens were asked if they had Syrians in their close social circles to measure the quality of contact. We created a dummy variable of those who answered "Yes" to this question. Contact location was asked a bit differently in the Syrian sample. Syrian respondents were presented with 12 settings and asked if they frequently interacted with citizens in each setting, with options for Yes (1) and No (0). We classified eight of these as negative contact sites and four as positive. By combining these, we created two variables that ranged from 0 to 8 and 0 to 4. Syrian respondents were also asked if they had Turkish friends and if they interacted frequently with their Turkish neighbours. These enter into models as dummy variables for those who reported having Turkish friends and interacting frequently with Turkish neighbours.

We operationalised threat perception across three dimensions: economic, symbolic, and physical. For economic threat, Turkish citizens were asked whether they thought Syrians were taking their jobs and were a burden on welfare resources. Syrian respondents were asked if they anticipated their economic situation worsening in a year and if they experienced exploitation in the labour market. Symbolic threat was assessed by asking citizens if they perceived Syrians as a threat to Turkish culture and if they felt Istanbul had become "Arabicized." Syrian respondents were asked if they saw youth distancing themselves from Syrian culture as a problem and if they struggled to maintain their cultural customs in Türkiye. Regarding physical security, citizens were asked whether they perceived their neighbourhood as less safe and if crime rates had increased since the arrival of Syrians. Syrian respondents were asked if they felt unsafe in their residential neighbourhood. All these threat perception questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale in the surveys except for the question about Syrian youth distancing themselves from the Syrian culture. However, for the purposes of our analysis, they were all included in the models as dummy variables (1 for "agree" or "strongly agree" with the given statement or who has experienced the given event or situation).

We analyse the determinants of perception of integration and the impact on contact on threat perception with ordered logistic regression and logistic regression models. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression is not suitable for our dependent variables since they are ordinal or binomial. Ordered logistic regression models constitute the best statistical model when the dependent variable is an ordinal categorical variable, and logistic regression provides the best option when the dependent variable is a dummy variable.

4 | Results

Table 2 presents the results of ordered logistic regressions of perception of integration of Syrians to Turkish society among

TABLE 2 | Ordered logistic regression models of perception of Syrians' integration to society by Turkish citizens.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Age	0.991* (-2.44)	0.990** (-2.56)	0.992* (1.96)	0.993 (-1.75)	0.992* (-1.98)	0.991* (-2.17)	0.991* (-2.19)	0.991* (-2.25)	0.992* (-1.95)	0.994 (-1.23)
Gender (Male=1)	0.837 (-1.61)	0.846 (-1.52)	0.796* (-2.06)	0.778* (-2.24)	0.764* (-2.37)	0.832 (-1.65)	0.847 (-1.48)	0.841 (-1.53)	0.837 (-1.55)	0.749* (-2.43)
College or above education	0.975 (-0.16)	0.960 (-0.26)	1.064 (0.40)	1.150 (0.89)	1.166 (0.96)	0.992 (-0.05)	1.083 (0.50)	0.898 (-0.67)	0.998 (-0.01)	1.166 (0.91)
Medium and high income	1.087 (0.61)	1.111 (0.77)	0.974 (-0.19)	1.108 (0.74)	1.091 (0.62)	1.067 (0.47)	0.916 (-0.62)	1.107 (0.73)	0.962 (-0.26)	0.957 (-0.30)
Contact in nonoptimal locations		0.940 (-1.29)			0.654*** (-6.45)					0.799** (-3.22)
Contact in optimal locations			1.207*** (5.40)		1.334*** (5.77)					1.284*** (4.79)
Having Syrians in close social circle				4.054*** (10.83)	3.760*** (9.66)					4.059*** (9.78)
They take our jobs since they work for lower wages						0.357*** (-6.63)			0.440*** (-5.17)	0.582*** (-3.25)
They are a burden on welfare system of our country						0.450*** (-5.64)			0.648** (-2.95)	0.619*** (-3.11)
Increase in the Syrian population will negatively impact Turkish culture							0.731* (-2.44)		0.771* (-1.96)	0.719* (-2.38)
I think that Istanbul has been Arabized									0.228*** (-11.37)	0.402*** (-6.50)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Since the arrival of Syrians my neighbourhood has become less safe								0.579*** (−3.41)	0.718* (−1.97)	0.591** (−3.01)
Crime rate has increased in my neighbourhood because of Syrians								0.402*** (−5.56)	0.461*** (−4.52)	0.397*** (−5.27)
N	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233
Pseudo R ²	0.003	0.003	0.013	0.043	0.059	0.038	0.053	0.052	0.095	0.145

Note: Each cell contains odds ratios and z-scores in parentheses. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

Turkish citizens. Model 1 in the table presents the base model with control variables and displays the odds ratios. In the model, only age has a statistically significant impact. A 1-year increase in age decreases by 1% the probability of agreeing with the statement that Syrians are integrated. Models 2 through 4 add contact variables to the base model separately. In the models, the direction of effect for control variables does not change. In Model 2, the frequency of contact in nonoptimal locations (sites where superficial and arbitrary encounters occur) has no effect, but in Model 3 the effect of the frequency of contact in optimal locations (sites that facilitate higher-quality interaction and positive engagement meeting at least two of Allport's optimal conditions) is statistically significant. One-unit increase in the frequency of contact increases by 20% the odds of seeing Syrians as integrated. In Model 4, having Syrian friends in a close social circle increases perception of integration by 300%. When we include all contact variables to the base model at the same time in Model 5, the frequency of contact in nonoptimal locations is now statistically significant. Respondents who interact with Syrians in optimal locations also interact with them in nonoptimal locations, thus possibly causing the change in statistical significance. Overall, however, the models support H2 and H3, while providing no support for H1. Frequency of contact by itself does not reduce negative attitudes against Syrians and even has a negative impact when contact is not optimal.

In Models 6 through 8, we added economic, symbolic, and physical threat variables to the base model. The statistically significant results of the analyses indicate that the perception of all types of threat is negatively associated with the perception of integration. When we added all threat variables to model together in Model 9, their effect remained statistically significant, although there was some change in magnitude. These results support H4. Finally, in Model 10, we included all the variables. All the contact and threat variables have statistically significant effects in the model, and the directions of the effect remain the same. This, again, suggests that the quality of contact as well as the threat perception plays significant roles in determining the perception of Syrian refugees in Istanbul.

In order to understand the relationship between interpersonal contact and threat perception, we carried out ordered logistic regression analyses of perception of threat. In the models presented in Table 3, which display odds ratios, we assess the impact of control and contact variables on threat variables. In the models, age and being a male are positively associated with perceiving Syrians as an economic, symbolic, or physical threat, although only age has a statistically significant impact and only in two models. The direction of effect of having a college education varies from model to model and has a statistically significant effect only in one model. The effect of having medium or high income, however, is more defined. Having medium or high income decreases the odds of perceiving Syrian refugees as a threat in all models, and the effect is statistically significant in three of them. The impact of contact locations is as we expected and supports our fifth hypothesis (H5). The frequency of contact in nonoptimal locations increases threat perception, while the frequency of contact in optimal locations decreases it. The effect is statistically significant for contact in nonoptimal locations in

TABLE 3 | Ordered logistic regression models of contact variables on threat variables among Turkish citizens.

	They take our jobs since they work for lower wages	They are a burden on welfare system of our country	Increase in the Syrian population will negatively impact Turkish culture	I think that Istanbul has been Arabized	Since the arrival of Syrians my neighbourhood has become less safe	Crime rate has increased in my neighbourhood because of Syrians
Age	1.003 (0.84)	1.006 (1.53)	1.011** (2.95)	1.004 (1.20)	1.008* (2.23)	1.006 (1.89)
Gender (Male = 1)	1059 (0.52)	1.202 (1.66)	1.014 (0.13)	0.864 (−1.38)	1.056 (0.52)	1.000 (0.00)
College or above education	1.257 (1.43)	0.981 (−0.12)	1.470* (2.42)	0.882 (−0.83)	1.086 (0.54)	0.777 (−1.69)
Medium and high income	0.676** (−2.87)	0.912 (−0.68)	0.575*** (−4.14)	0.711** (−2.60)	0.896 (−0.86)	0.834 (−1.42)
Contact in nonoptimal locations	1.077 (1.14)	1.483*** (6.04)	0.960 (−0.65)	1.435*** (5.84)	1.720*** (8.68)	1.802*** (9.43)
Contact in optimal locations	0.837*** (−3.63)	0.899* (2.21)	0.878** (−2.83)	0.814*** (−4.37)	0.932 (−1.55)	0.914* (−2.01)
Having Syrians in close social circle	0.709* (−2.47)	0.471*** (5.55)	0.872 (−1.03)	0.572*** (−4.12)	0.992 (−0.06)	0.778* (−1.95)
<i>N</i>	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233	1233
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.017	0.025	0.020	0.021	0.029	0.034

Note: Each cell contains odds ratios and z-scores in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

TABLE 4 | Ordered logistic regression models of perception of integration to Turkish Society among Syrians.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Age	0.993 (-1.26)	0.992 (-1.42)	0.993 (-1.21)	0.995 (-0.82)	0.995 (-0.86)	0.993 (-1.28)	0.995 (-0.97)	0.992 (-1.51)	0.993 (-1.29)	0.995 (-0.87)
Gender (Male=1)	1.520*** (3.78)	1.405** (3.04)	1.320* (2.31)	1.209 (1.66)	0.972 (-0.22)	1.373** (2.82)	1.427*** (3.18)	1.600*** (4.20)	1.407** (3.00)	1.001 (0.01)
College or above education	1.666** (2.59)	1.774** (2.91)	1.576* (2.30)	1.720** (2.73)	1.718** (2.72)	1.552* (2.55)	1.581* (2.30)	1.600* (2.36)	1.529* (2.11)	1.598* (2.32)
Medium and high income	1.986*** (3.64)	1.720** (2.83)	1.887*** (3.35)	1.520* (2.16)	1.285 (1.26)	1.769** (2.98)	1.919*** (3.44)	2.032*** (3.78)	1.811** (3.12)	1.307 (1.35)
Years since arriving in Türkiye	1.082* (2.44)	1.073* (2.18)	1.080* (2.39)	1.003 (0.10)	0.997 (-0.08)	1.077* (2.27)	1.079* (2.31)	1.098** (2.88)	1.091** (2.64)	1.018 (0.54)
Contact in nonoptimal locations	0.854*** (-5.57)				0.863*** (-4.93)					0.862*** (-4.66)
Contact in optimal locations			1.264** (3.03)		1.274** (3.07)					1.269** (3.01)
Having Turkish friends				2.684*** (7.08)	2.659*** (6.97)					2.521*** (6.55)
Interaction with Turkish neighbours				3.581*** (8.98)	3.322*** (8.37)					3.103*** (7.64)
My economic condition will be worse a year from now						0.537*** (-5.36)			0.611*** (-4.17)	0.723** (-2.66)
Experienced exploitation of labor						0.604*** (-4.28)			0.682*** (-3.16)	0.971 (-0.23)
Youth distancing themselves from Syrian culture is a problem							0.675 (-1.75)		0.721 (-1.43)	0.771 (-1.13)

(Continues)

TABLE 4 | (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Unable to maintain the customs in Syria							0.536*** (-5.20)		0.650*** (-3.46)	0.927 (-0.58)
I feel unsafe in the neighbourhood I live in								0.215*** (-7.03)	0.253*** (-6.21)	0.282*** (-5.60)
N	1166	1166	1166	1166	1166	1166	1166	1166	1166	1166
Pseudo R ²	0.014	0.024	0.017	0.087	0.096	0.027	0.024	0.030	0.045	0.110

Note: Each cell contains odds ratios and z-scores in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

four out of six models and five out of six for contact in optimal locations. Having Syrians in a close social circle has a negative impact in all models, but the effect is statistically significant in 3 of the models. Overall, the results of our analyses support our hypotheses and the claims about both the frequency and quality of contact in the literature.

Table 4 presents the results of ordered logistic regressions of perception of their integration to Turkish society among Syrian respondents. Model 1 presents the base model and displays the odds ratios. In the model, age does not have a statistically significant impact, while being a male, having a college or above education, having a medium or high income, and the number of years of residence in Türkiye all have a positive effect. The positive effects of high income, college education, and years of residence are in line with the literature. The significant positive impact of being a male is noteworthy. Because of the traditional patriarchal structure of Syrian society, male Syrian refugees are more likely to spend time in the public sphere compared to women. This, arguably, leads to a higher sense of integration into Turkish society. The level of interaction with the members of Turkish society is much lower among Syrian women. For example, in the survey, 84% of Syrian male respondents reported that they are in employment, while the figure for female respondents was only around 15%.

Models 2 through 5 add contact variables to the base model. The direction of effect for control variables remains the same in the models, although gender and years since arrival in Türkiye lose significance in Model 4. The frequency of contact in nonoptimal locations has a statistically significant negative impact on the perception of integration, while the frequency of contact in optimal locations has a significant positive effect. Having Turkish friends and interacting frequently with Turkish neighbours also have positive significant effects on the perception of integration among Syrian respondents. Having Turkish friends increases the odds of perceiving oneself as integrated by 168%, while interacting frequently with Turkish neighbours increases it by 250%. This suggests that H2 and H3 hold for Syrian refugees as well, and again there is no support for H1.

We added threat variables to the base model in models 6 through 9. Economic and physical threat perceptions have a significant negative impact on the perception of integration. Among the symbolic threat variables, inability to maintain Syrian customs has a significant negative impact, while thinking that Syrian youth are distancing themselves from the Syrian culture has no significant effect. The final model in the table includes all the variables. In the model, only having a college or above education has a significant (positive) impact among the control variables. Among the threat variables, only two (expectation about economic condition in 1 year and physical security threat perception) keep their statistical significance. However, all the contact variables have the same statistically significant impact in the model. This suggests that among Syrian refugees residing in Istanbul, contact is the most important predictor of the perception of one's own integration into Turkish society.

When we analysed the impact of contact on threat perception among Syrians, the results were less pronounced and less clear compared to Turkish citizens. In the results presented in Table 5,

TABLE 5 | Ordered logistic and logistic regression models of contact variables on threat variables among Syrians.

	My economic condition will be worse a year from now	Experienced exploitation of labour	Youth distancing themselves from Syrian culture is a problem^a	Unable to maintain the customs in Syria	I feel unsafe in the neighbourhood I live in
Age	0.991* (−1.99)	0.997 (−0.57)	1.026** (2.65)	0.997 (−0.55)	1.014** (2.63)
Gender (Male = 1)	1.140 (1.10)	0.845 (−1.42)	0.722 (−1.21)	1.154 (1.22)	0.711** (−2.59)
College or above education	1.486* (2.17)	1.330 (1.54)	0.630 (−0.86)	0.977 (−0.13)	1.179 (0.82)
Medium and high income	1.300 (1.46)	0.664* (−2.20)	0.791 (−0.052)	1.347 (1.64)	1.084 (0.40)
Years since arriving in Türkiye	0.944 (−1.80)	0.921* (−2.52)	1.339*** (3.68)	1.088* (2.63)	0.921* (−2.29)
Contact in nonoptimal locations	0.987 (−0.48)	1.273*** (8.41)	1.100 (1.52)	0.822*** (−7.04)	1.195*** (5.73)
Contact in optimal locations	0.864* (−2.01)	0.989 (−0.14)	1.046 (0.28)	1.095 (1.24)	1.183* (2.07)
Having Turkish friends	1.875*** (4.92)	1.017 (0.13)	0.710 (−1.12)	0.666*** (−3.31)	1.587*** (3.28)
Interaction with Turkish neighbours	1.460** (3.01)	0.538*** (4.82)	0.870 (−0.046)	1.254 (1.80)	1.648*** (3.54)
N	1166	1166	1166	1166	1166
Pseudo R ²	0.021	0.044	0.057	0.022	0.035

Note: Each cell contains odds ratios and z-scores in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

^aLogistic regression.

age significantly decreases the threat perception regarding economic condition 1 year from the time of data collection while significantly increasing the threat perception regarding physical security. Being a male has no significant effect except for its negative effect on perception of physical security threat. Similarly, education and income have a significant impact only in one model each. The frequency of contact in nonoptimal locations increases the threat perception regarding labour exploitation and physical security. The frequency of contact in nonoptimal locations significantly decreases the threat perception regarding economic conditions in 1 year and increases the perception of physical security threat. Similarly, having Turkish friends and frequent interaction with Turkish neighbours does not have any consistent effect. This suggests that the link between the threat perception and interpersonal contact is much weaker among Syrian refugees compared to citizens and there is no clear support for H5 in the Syrian sample.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we examined the arguments of contact and threat theories for both host communities and refugees in qualitatively different contact settings. Our findings indicate that the frequency and quality of contact play crucial roles in shaping the perceptions of host community members regarding refugee integration, as well as the self-perceptions of Syrians regarding

their own integration in Istanbul. Specifically, for members of the host society in Türkiye, mere frequency of contact does not necessarily lead to reduced negative attitudes toward Syrians. In fact, negative impacts may arise when contact occurs in environments characterised by superficial and arbitrary encounters. Conversely, positive types of contact contribute to a more favourable perception of the integration of Syrian refugees. These findings also hold true for Syrians, with contact in the form of friendships and neighbourhood interactions with Turks significantly enhancing their perception of integration. Overall, these findings align with the conclusions drawn by contact researchers. While threat perceptions are influential, contact under settings that facilitate higher-quality interaction and positive engagement serves as a moderating factor in their influence.

These findings underscore the need for continued research, particularly as the duration of Syrians' stay in Türkiye extends. Our data indicate that longer residence is associated with improved refugee experiences, including reduced labour exploitation and increased safety. This improvement may result from greater familiarity with legal and social systems, stronger support networks, and enhanced self-protection strategies. However, prolonged stays also raise concerns about cultural erosion, as older Syrians observe younger generations distancing themselves from traditional customs (see also Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm et al. 2025). While physical and economic threats may diminish over time, perceptions of symbolic threats could intensify. Additionally, a

paradox emerges regarding safety perceptions: Turkish citizens who have positive interactions with Syrians tend to report fewer security concerns, yet Syrians themselves—despite forming social ties—continue to feel unsafe. This persistent insecurity likely stems from their precarious legal status under Türkiye's “temporary protection” framework, which fosters fears of deportation and instability. Growing xenophobia further exacerbates tensions, complicating the integration process. Nonetheless, inclusive policies have the potential to mitigate discrimination and promote both economic and social integration, fostering a greater sense of belonging. However, ensuring the safety of Syrian refugees requires more than policy reforms; rising social tensions and the political instrumentalisation of migration remain significant barriers. This study highlights the intricate relationship between intergroup contact, integration, and security, emphasising the need for evidence-based migration policies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study.

Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.70071>.

Endnotes

¹Türkiye's capital Ankara witnessed one of the major mob violence attempts in August 2021. Incidents started after a Turkish male was murdered by a Syrian refugee and continued for 2 days in Altındağ, where many Syrian homes and shops were attacked and damaged by the crowd. For details, see <https://m.bianet.org/english/migration/248616-attacks-on-syrian-refugees-homes-shops-continue-in-Turkey-s-capital-on-the-second-day>.

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