

An Examination of Hostility to Foreigners in Bursa Using the Xenophobia Scale in the Framework of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ Model of Samuel Huntington

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ABSTRACT

Xenophobia has been intensely examined in recent years, in the contexts of both migration policies and societal adaptation processes. The subject of this research was to determine within the framework of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ model of Samuel Huntington, whether or not the effect on the perception of the “other” in the processes of different religions and cultural identities living together has an effect on the extent of prejudice and hostility between individuals as much as at the international level. The aim of the study was to determine the levels of xenophobia of individuals living in Bursa, Türkiye, using an objective scale. Thus, the Turkish version of the Xenophobia Scale was applied to 435 participants, and validity and reliability analyses were conducted using SPSS software. The study findings demonstrated that xenophobia was shaped by structural and cultural dynamics exceeding the individual level in this sample from Bursa. Although the explanations based on the cultural difference of the Clash of Civilizations Theory of Huntington were partially confirmed, economic concerns ($\bar{X}=4.08$) and security concerns ($\bar{X}=4.35$) were seen to be determinant at an equal degree. These results indicate that societal tensions cannot be explained with one-dimensional cultural readings, but that the nature of conflict dynamics is multi-layered.

Keywords: Xenophobia Scale, Hostility to Foreigners, Clash of Civilization, Anti-Immigrant Sentiment, Perception of Cultural Threat

INTRODUCTION

The word “xenophobia” is derived from the Greek “xenos” meaning foreigner/stranger and “phobos” meaning fear, and the most basic meaning is “the fear of foreigners”. However, in social sciences this word is used not only to describe a condition of fear, but as a form of discrimination encompassing multi-dimensional attitudes such as anger, hate, distrust, social distance, and even physical border exclusion (Zick, Pettigrew and Wagner, 2008). Xenophobia can manifest at both the personal and structural level. In this sense, it can be produced through historical memory, political structure, and the ideological codes of a society independently of the psychological constructs of an individual. In social sciences, xenophobia is often used in association with concepts such as racism, ethnocentrism, hate discourse, othering, and cultural discrimination, and sometimes is even confused with these concepts. However, unlike these concepts, xenophobia is not based solely on “race”, but is a more comprehensive form of exclusion that can develop on the basis of cultural, language, religious, and even symbolic differences (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson and Armstrong, 2001). Ethnocentrism refers to an individual disparaging other cultures

by seeing their own culture as universal and superior to other cultures (Aysuna and Korkut Altuna, 2008; Alkan and Erdem, 2021). As a step beyond ethnocentrism, xenophobia makes this disparagement a form of societal and political action. A xenophobic individual regards a foreigner not only with suspicion, but also perceives them as a threat (Bulu, 2024).

Throughout human history, the perception of a “foreigner” has been determinant in the processes forming the identity of individuals and societies, and fears, prejudices, and exclusion mechanisms have usually emerged within the efforts to give meaning to those who are different. This condition, referred to as xenophobia in social sciences, has given rise to the complex social phenomenon manifesting with fear, hate, intolerance, and exclusionary attitudes towards an individual or group perceived as foreign (Karabulut, 2022; Üstün, 2025).

Xenophobia is not only a personal fear or psychological reflex, but is a form of structural discrimination, produced by societal structures, nourished ideologically, and reproduced at the institutional level (Wodak, 2015). By showing ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural differences as reasons, this discrimination in practice depends on creating an “other” on the duality of “us” and “them” and causes serious harm to the social fabric.

There are comprehensive academic studies of the relationship between xenophobia and racism in the context of the apartheid experience in South Africa. Some of these studies have presented similar definitions of the term. In one of those studies, Nyamnjoh (2006) defined xenophobia as “intense dislike, hate, or fear of others perceived as foreign”. After citing the common definition (dislike of foreigners), Bronwyn Harris (2002) viewed xenophobia as “a negative attitude, dislike, fear or hate of foreigners”. Kenneth Tafira (2011) took 11 May 2008 as the base, as the day when violence against black African migrants exploded in South Africa. The violence started in the township of Alexandra in Johannesburg then spread to other areas resulting in 62 deaths, hundreds of casualties, and the displacement of thousands. While discussing this, Tafira defined xenophobia in general as “intense dislike, hate, or fear of people perceived as foreign”.

In various sources, there are many definitions that repeat the dictionary meaning of “xenophobia” in different ways. However, many definitions remain only as the ordinary dictionary meaning, rather than comprehensively defining and analyzing the main characteristics and components. Taking the above-stated definitions into consideration, the key words of the term, xenophobia, are “foreign, strange, fear, hate, and dislike”. The words stranger and foreigner have a fluid and flexible nature but both describe societal conditions. Marotto (2017) stated that despite the similarity of stranger, foreigner, and other concepts, they are not the same. When referring to a foreigner as a stranger, this is usually a person who is known and has been seen. In this sense, according to Marotto, “a stranger is a physical stranger” but there is no name or face of the “other”. Marotto (2017:10), and Kearney and Semonovitch'in (2011: 6) refer to the relationship between these three concepts as “the Foreigner occupies the threshold between the Other and the Stranger”.

Xenophobia can occur in the encounters and integration processes of societies; the meaning of the word is “fear of foreigners” derived from the Greek “xenos” meaning foreigner/stranger and “phobos” meaning fear. Although the root of the word is “fear”, in practice it refers to an irrational prejudice, distrust, and attitude of hate towards foreigners. There are different views of xenophobia throughout the world. A significant example is the increase in Islamophobia in western countries after the attack on the twin towers in New York on 11 September 2001. Cases of discrimination against Muslims in European societies reached severe dimensions (Aydin, 2008). Types of xenophobia, such as Islamophobia can be mediated in identity politics as an othering ideology (Evkuran, 2003).

These types of prejudices lead to stigmatisation of the targeted group as “always foreign”. In a study conducted on the Turkish diaspora in Germany, negative attributes associated with the concept of “foreigner” were embodied in almost all migrant identities, thereby showing that the Turkish population that had lived there for generations were permanently labelled as “foreign” (Baran, 2025). Similarly in Türkiye, where there has been a highly cultured societal fabric for many years, the recent effect of mass migration has shown an increase in unpleasant discourse towards foreigners. Social tensions arising from time to time around migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries have brought the concept of xenophobia to prominence in discussions specifically in Türkiye. The aim of this study was to address this concept specifically in Bursa.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the 1993 article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” and the book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, published in 1996, Samuel P. Huntington suggested a new paradigm in international relations. According to Huntington, in the period after the Cold War, a conflict of civilizations would replace ideological conflicts. This approach engendered an understanding of security which deepened cultural differences and reproduced the concept of “other”. In this context, this can be read as reflections of the increasingly widespread xenophobia and Huntington’s theory at the societal level.

According to Huntington's theory, the world is divided into eight basic civilizations of Western, Islam, Orthodox, Hindu, Chinese, Japanese, African, and Latin America (Erken 2021). These civilizations are distinct from each other through historical experiences, religious references and cultural values, and conflicts arise from these distinctions. When evaluating Huntington's approach, Koç (2019) stated that seeing civilizations as static, homogenous and polar opposites nourishes cultural intolerance. Yamaç (2021) emphasized how this theory lays the ground for political manipulation in the Post-Truth age. Therefore, the Huntington approach is not only analytical but has given rise to normative effects. The increasing opposition to migration in Europe is concentrated on individuals from Islamic cultures. Aktaş (2014) defined Islamophobia not as cultural but as a political tool. Accordingly, Islam has been established as a threat in the process of redefining national identity in Europe. Üregen (2021) legitimized this threat under the guise of "defence of civilization". Özer stated that the "them and us" differentiation, which was widespread in the media in the period after 9/11 was based on the Huntington theory. Bayram and Çağlar (2019) also showed how the political discourse of this differentiation affected the population using the example of Northern Cyprus. Sectarian conflicts in the Middle East have been re-read according to the Huntington approach. Dündar (2019) stated that the "Shiite Crescent" controversy was in parallel with the conflict of civilizations theory. Accordingly, the expansionist policies of Iran were encoded as a threat to sectarian identities and this increased societal prejudices. Acar evaluated this situation from a different perspective, arguing that the real conflict was over interests, and thus the clash of civilizations discourse was seen as a "cover-up" function hiding the main aims. The media is strong in shaping current cultural identities. Çuhadar and Gölcü (2018) revealed how Islamophobic discourse was reproduced through the media. Huntington's approach formed a theoretical basis for this discourse.

The Huntington approach is a theory presenting a polarising framework and which narrows interactions between cultures. This theory is not thought to be useful for building a peaceful social order as it encodes differences not as assets but as a threat. Although it includes some functional aspects in the explanation of xenophobia, the Huntington theory does not produce a solution, but reproduces conflict.

The confusion created by dilemmas in a globalised world, or a world trying to be globalised, has become extremely functional in determining the direction of societies. With effects such as wars and economic dynamics, the system is coming to a point where borders in the world have been removed. However, with a strange contradiction, the dynamics of this system are fed by xenophobia and the confusion created by cultural code differences such as religion and sectarianism.

The "conflict of civilizations" model of Samuel Huntington presents a notable conceptual framework to understand xenophobia in Türkiye. As Türkiye is the crossroads of western and Islamic civilizations, it is one of the leading countries that has experienced these conflicts in concrete form. Tensions between the civilizations in question have a multi-layered effect from cultural codes to political discourse and from societal dynamics to daily relationships, and this has reinforced opposition to foreigners over time. With the increasing migration after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, opposition to migration became more evident in Türkiye. The perception of migrants as a "cultural threat" is known to have become more widespread in Türkiye. The foundation of this perception is not only prejudice, but there are also economic problems, difficulties in accessing services, and uncertainties about societal adaptation. This opposition is fed with the deepening of the "us and them" discrimination in political discourse, and just as in the Huntington model, differences sometimes become an axis of conflict.

It is a fact that this perception of society is not based only on irrational fears. While the acceptance of migrants by Türkiye has been shaped by historical missions and geopolitical necessities, it has also created concrete effects such as redistribution of economic resources, pressure on public services, and competition in the labour market. Uncertainty in migration policies increases concerns in society, and referring to migrants as "guests" stands as a barrier to producing a permanent solution.

Xenophobia in Türkiye cannot be explained by personal attitudes alone; there is a multi-layered structure formed at the intersection of economic, cultural, and political processes. Therefore, efforts to produce a solution must be shaped by comprehensive policies directed not only at migrants but also at the local population.

Bursa is the fourth largest city in Türkiye with a multicultural sociodemographic structure from the effects of intense internal migration historically and the more recent increase in foreign population. With a population of more than 3 million, the economic and societal fabric of the city has been shaped with migration from different regions of Anatolia. Due to recent crises in neighbouring geographic regions, there has been a significant increase in the number of foreigners settling in Bursa. According to the data of 1 May 2025 reported by the Directorate of Migration Administration, the number of Syrians in Bursa was 159,950, comprising approximately 5% of the city population (url 1). While enriching the cultural variety of Bursa, this has also led to interactions and sometimes tensions between different societal groups. To understand the growing feeling of xenophobia in the city, the multi-layered demographic structure of Bursa must be taken into consideration.

Despite the increasing public and academic interest in xenophobia, there has been insufficient investigation of how this phenomenon is nourished and reproduced not only with the psychological tendencies of individuals but also with structural factors. The main aim of this study was to analyze current societal views of xenophobia and to present an empirical evaluation of a sample from Bursa. It also aimed to develop new policy recommendations by questioning the efficacy of methods of intervention for xenophobia. The research question was to be able to reveal that xenophobia is not merely a form of prejudice but is a form of discrimination produced by political, economic, and societal structures. A specific aim of the study was to examine xenophobic tendencies in Bursa in the framework of the Samuel Huntington clash of civilizations model. Thus, the extent of xenophobia in the societal structure of Bursa will be determined and to what extent this overlaps with the conceptual framework of Huntington will be analyzed.

METHOD

A qualitative research method was adopted in this study to objectively measure xenophobic attitudes specifically in Bursa. Data were obtained from 435 participants using the Xenophobia Scale, which is a standardised data collection tool. The data collection process was conducted online (Google Forms), by telephone, and in face-to-face interviews, and the data obtained were analyzed statistically using SPSS vn. 25.0 software. This methodological framework allowed the examination of the societal distribution of xenophobia in Bursa. This scale-based data collection tool reliably measured the xenophobic tendencies of the participants and how these attitudes were related to demographic variables was revealed in detail.

In the analysis techniques selected, the data did not remain at the descriptive level, but differences and correlations between variables could also be examined. In this way, the current situation was demonstrated and a roadmap based on empirical data of xenophobia and interventions was able to be produced for presentation to policy-makers, educators, and social service specialists.

In the data collection, a descriptive information form, designed in accordance with the aim of the study, was used together with a Xenophobia Scale, prepared by the researchers with reference to the relevant literature. The data were analyzed using SPSS software.

The Xenophobia Scale, created to measure levels of xenophobia, is a measurement tool with proven validity, reliability, and psychometric reliability. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale was determined to be 0.86 in this study, which is above the accepted limit of reliability in social sciences (Büyüköztürk, 2018). The scale has sub-dimensions of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural xenophobia, with statements scored on a 5-point Likert scale to indicate the level of agreement between two extremes (Turan et al., 2015).

RESULTS

Data were evaluated from a total of 435 participants, comprising 283 (65.1%) females and 152 (34.9%) males, of which 173 (39.8%) were in the 18-35 years age range and 262 (60.2%) were aged >35 years. The education level of the participants was recorded as primary school by 25 (5.7%) subjects, high school by 67 (15.4%), degree level by 334 (76.8%), and postgraduate level by 9 (2.1%).

The Cronbach alpha value of the 11 statements was found to be 0.827, above the acceptable level of 0.60 (Taber, 2018). The overall mean value of the 11 statements was 3.926. Conformity to normal distribution of the values was tested with skewness and kurtosis values. Values in the range of -2 to +2 show normal distribution (George and Malley, 2010). The kurtosis value of the Xenophobia Scale was found to be -1.459 and the skewness value was 2.059 (borderline), so parametric tests were applied, and the results were stated as mean \pm standard deviation (SD) values. The mean values obtained for each of the statements in the scale were analyzed (Table 1)

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation values obtained for the 11 statements of the Xenophobia Scale

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation	n
1- Migration is out of control in this country.	3.38	1.822	435
2- Borders must be made more secure to prevent migrants entering this country.	4.69	.881	435
3- Migrants have caused an increase in crime.	4.35	1.095	435
4- Migrants are taking the jobs of people who live here.	4.08	1.274	435
5- Interaction with migrants makes me uneasy.	3.72	1.389	435
6- I am worried that unusual diseases will be spread from migrants.	3.99	1.353	435
7- I am afraid that if there is war or political tension migrants will remain loyal to their home country.	4.37	1.142	435
8- I believe that migrants will support my country in times of crisis.	1.89	1.338	435
9- I am afraid that my life will become worse with increasing migration.	4.29	1.247	435
10- I doubt that migrants will be primarily interested in this country.	4.12	1.282	435
11- I am afraid that as migration increases, our own culture will be lost.	4.26	1.272	435

As seen in Table 1, of the statements referring to xenophobia, the highest mean value (4.69) was obtained for statement 2: *Borders must be made more secure to prevent migrants entering this country*, indicating that the participants were doubtful about border security. The lowest mean value (1.89) was obtained for statement 8: *I believe that migrants will support my country in times of crisis*, indicating that the participants saw migrants as foreigners, and did not believe that they would support the country where they were now living. When the findings were evaluated in the context of the clash of civilizations theory of Samuel Huntington, there was seen to be a close relationship between xenophobic attitudes and cultural identity and civilization perceptions.

The majority (60.2%) of the study participants were aged >35 years and had high levels of concern about border security (mean 4.69), which was in parallel with the prediction of Huntington that “the borders between civilizations will be lines of conflict”. This indicated the tendency to perceive migrants as a cultural threat and was shaped on the basis of civilization identity.

The strong belief of the study participants that “migrants will not support this country in times of crisis” (mean 1.89) supports the argument of Huntington that “civilization affiliation determines political loyalty”. The concern of the participants that migration will lead to cultural degeneration (statement 8- mean 4.26) indicates that cultural differences have the potential to cause conflict. As emphasized by Huntington (1996), in a global order where cultural identities are becoming more distinct, these types of concerns increase societal tensions.

To determine differences in xenophobic attitudes according to the categorical variable of age, gender, and education level, the Independent t-test and ANOVA test were used. The age, gender, and education level of the participants were not determined to create any difference in xenophobic attitudes, suggesting that these attitudes are shaped more by cultural and civilization-based affiliations. It was emphasized by Huntington (1993) that in the period after the Cold War these types of collective responses may be attributed to the adoption of cultural identity rather than ideological distinctions.

The findings revealed some limitations of the Huntington model. That the participants saw migrants primarily as economic competition (statement 4: mean 4.08) and criminals (statement 3: mean 4.35) showed that conflicts were not only cultural, but also had economic and security dimensions. This supports the criticism of the Huntington approach that other factors are ignored when prioritising conflicts between civilizations (Aktaş, 2014; Üregen, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The findings obtained in this study demonstrated that the concerns about foreigners expressed by individuals living in Bursa were concentrated on certain subjects of perceived insecurity and threat. The high level of agreement with the statement, *“Borders must be made more secure to prevent migrants entering this country”* showed that migration was not seen only as a demographic change, but was also perceived as a cultural threat. In the “Clash of Civilizations” theory, Huntington stated that increased “us and them” discrimination between communities with different civilization codes is reflected in the social attitudes of these discriminated individuals (Erken, 2021; Koç, 2019).

According to the findings of this research, a significant proportion of the study participants believed that migrants increased crime rates, threatened the work opportunities of local people, and would not be loyal to the country in times of crisis. These views overlap with the approach of Huntington that Islamic civilization is perceived as a threat to the West. In the Huntington model, conflict is not only at the inter-state level, but is shaped by the cultural identities and perceptions of individuals (Yamaç, 2021). The lowest mean value in the Xenophobia Scale was obtained for the statement, *“I believe that migrants will support my country in times of crisis”* which was seen to be directly related to the “affiliations conflict between civilizations” theory of Huntington.

The perception of the study participants of migrants as a cultural threat can be evaluated at the micro-level as corresponding with the Huntington approach which suggests that differences between civilizations can harm societal peace. The high levels of agreement to the statements of *“I am afraid that as migration increases, our own culture will be lost”* and *“I am afraid that my life will become worse with increasing migration”* demonstrated that the threat perception was not only personal but also related to collective identity. According to Huntington, these types of perceptions become more evident in societies in contact with different civilization codes and increase the potential for conflict (Dündar, 2019).

The multicultural structure and increasing foreign population in Bursa has resulted in city residents having new encounter experiences, but these encounters have not led to completely positive interaction. The increasing discontented discourse towards Syrian migrants in particular shows that migrants are seen as an element “not included” or “external” to society. This overlaps with the conceptual framework of Huntington related to drawing cultural borders and constructing the “other” (Üregen, 2021). The concerns expressed in this study under the

concrete headings such as border security, unemployment, and health seem to reinforce xenophobic attitudes by combining with identity insecurity felt at the civilization level.

However, no significant difference was determined in xenophobic attitudes according to the demographic characteristics of age, gender, and education level. This result supports the argument in the Huntington model that rather than individual characteristics, cultural discrimination is based on deeper ideological and civilization-based distinctions. In this context, xenophobia can be shaped by the effect of societal discourse and historical memory, independently of the age or education level of the individual (Bulu, 2024; Karabulut, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrated that xenophobia in society is shaped not only by personal factors but also by structural and cultural factors. In this context, education policies, media discourse, and social adaptation programs of local authorities play a critical role in interventions for xenophobia. Despite the limitations of this research, it can be said that this study of xenophobia provides important findings that contribute to sociological analyses in the context of opposition to and marginalisation of migrants and societal adaptation policies. The results of this study showed that the xenophobic attitudes specific to Bursa partially overlapped with the clash of civilizations theory of Huntington, but that economic and security concerns were just as determinant as cultural factors. Although the statement by Huntington (1996) that “civilization identities make conflict inevitable” was partially confirmed by this research, when the multidimensional nature of conflict is taken into consideration, it can be seen that the model alone is not sufficient. In the light of these findings, there can be seen to be a need not only for cultural dialogue but also for the development of economic integration and security policies for more effective interventions for xenophobia. It can be recommended that future studies are multidimensional with qualitative content, and based on larger sample groups.

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