

Syrian Refugees in Turkey and Their Health During Covid-19 Pandemic: An Analysis of Online News

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Introduction

Since the start of the Syrian Civil War, Syrian refugees have fled to safer countries. Although they are legally under temporary protection in Turkey, it seems calling them refugees is sociologically more suited. Turkey as a safer country, increasingly accepted refugees to the country and became one of the major hosts of the Syrian Refugees. Government policies, being a neighboring country with Syria and Turkey-European Union joint plans are some of the big parts of this hosting. This major hosting is causing several problems such as housing, employment, and discrimination.

A lot of studies suggest that some of the discrimination is coming directly through media outlets. For example, Van Dijk (1993) says that the media is reproducing racist views against refugees. There are also a lot more studies showing that the media is consciously or unconsciously pumping hatred against refugees. That brought my first question to the table. Most of the media, at least mainstream media in Turkey, are influenced by the government. Self-censorship is usual for Turkish media outlets and is dependent on the government (Inceoglu et al., 2016). These pro-government news outlets are supportive of the government's migration policies. On the other hand opposition and left-wing news outlets are also generally supporting refugee rights. Therefore, is the Turkish news media, unlike other countries, supporting the refugees? That situation is also related to the second question. If these media outlets are generally supporting refugees because of political reasons, are they sincerely writing about their health problems during the pandemic or not? Because there is a general understanding that immigrant-related news is event-driven. Simply, if there is nothing extraordinary then there is no news about it (Gemi et al., 2013).

Probably passing through a global pandemic on one hand and Turkey's economic issues, early election, and new constitution discussions on other hand shadowed the boiling Syrian refugee issue. No matter what is going on around, online news is stable for our daily lives, and checking them will put a new perspective to our look on the Syrian refugee issue. Because internet users are always getting notifications, seeing them through social media accounts, and visiting the websites ourselves. They have a great impact on our lives. So, this study tries to find answers to the following questions: what kind of news about Syrian

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refugees is published? What are they about? Their health situation or other issues such as their presence in Turkey and the attitude towards them?

Syrian Refugees and Turkish Media: Literature Review

There are plenty of previous studies about similar subjects on refugee issues in Turkey. For example, Göktuna Yaylacı & Karakuş (2015) find out that Syrian refugees are shown as victims and visitors in the newspapers. Doğanay & Keleş (2016) also showed that the media is generally not looking after refugee rights, conditions. Yet they are looking after the aids and political aspects of the refugee issue, as this study will also examine. They also showed that the media is acting sentimental and trying to affect the conscience of the people, but again not showing the actual causes and effects of the issue. Pandır et al. (2016) also, similarly to this study, showed that the media is shaping their narrative according to the closeness to the government. They also stated that the media usually use neutral or supportive narratives for Syrian refugees. Kardeş et al. (2017) differently than others, studied social media discourse and examined a very popular blogging website in Turkey. They find out that social media users see Syrian refugees as a source of great danger and unrest. Yet, they also stated that there is a large number of supportive comments too. Finally, Ongun (2014) stated that news outlets are choosing sides according to their ties with the government and shaping their narrative about The Syrian Civil War. This literature review also helped the shaping of this research question. Most of these studies find out that politics are the main motivation of refugee-related news. Naturally, it seems like news outlets are more interested in implementing the elite's agenda and discourse through media power than the interest and well-being of refugees. Seeing how much news outlets valued Syrian refugees' health condition in the Covid-19 Pandemic can help the understanding how sincere they are about their positive comments about Syrian refugees and why they are publishing the news. Therefore, the goal of this research is to check the news about Syrian refugees through one year of the Covid-19 Pandemic and see what the news is about, whether they have a positive or negative narrative and if they have a political agenda behind them and do they sincerely care about refugees well-being. Finally, this research may influence other researches and can open up a new way to check how news serves political agendas or how sincere these "humanitarian" inspired news stories are.

Methodology

This study is trying to find out Turkish online news media and their attitude towards Syrian refugees during the Covid-19 Pandemic. How much they wrote about their health, what they wrote about and why they wrote it that way. For this purpose, this study uses content analysis.

Neuendorf (2017) says that content analysis may be briefly defined as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics. But in more detail, content analysis is used to make binding outcomes by interpreting and coding the texts and other

documents. That way qualitative data found by the researcher can become quantitative data. Choosing this methodology helped to understand all kinds of news regarding Syrian refugees and specific news about their health were also deeply examined and interpreted. Therefore this study can show positive and critical outcomes about the research question.

Population and Sample

The population of this study is online news about Syrian Refugees in March 2020-March 2021. For finding out the population, researches were made examining the word "Syrian refugees" through Google News. This research was made to see how online news about Syrian refugees is formed in Turkey during the Covid-19 pandemic. This population consists of 154 different news articles. The sample of the study is health-related news consisting of 11 different news articles about Syrian refugees.

Data Collection and Analysis

News sources were examined for the research, and Google News was chosen among them. Google News is described as the world's largest news source (Wang, 2020). Therefore, Google News emerged as a more reliable and diverse source. While collecting the data, the "Suriyeli mülteciler" term, which literally means Syrian refugees in Turkish, was used. For more optimized search date tool of Google News was used and the dates were chosen every month. After the data collection process, 154 different news items were found. Only 11 of them were directly related to health and Covid-19 issues. In the study, it was aimed to interpret the study by creating different titles and sub-titles about the news. Titles are date, subject, and attitude. With these titles, the study aims to find out which dates are more frequently used for Syrian refugee-related news, what is the subject, and how is the general narrative attitude towards the refugees. Date category is apparent, subjects are chosen after reading attentively. Some news might include several categories yet the most obvious one was chosen. Attitude is a complex issue among those titles. But, by counting positive and negative words, checking the positive sentences with negative connotations or vice versa, impartiality is preserved.

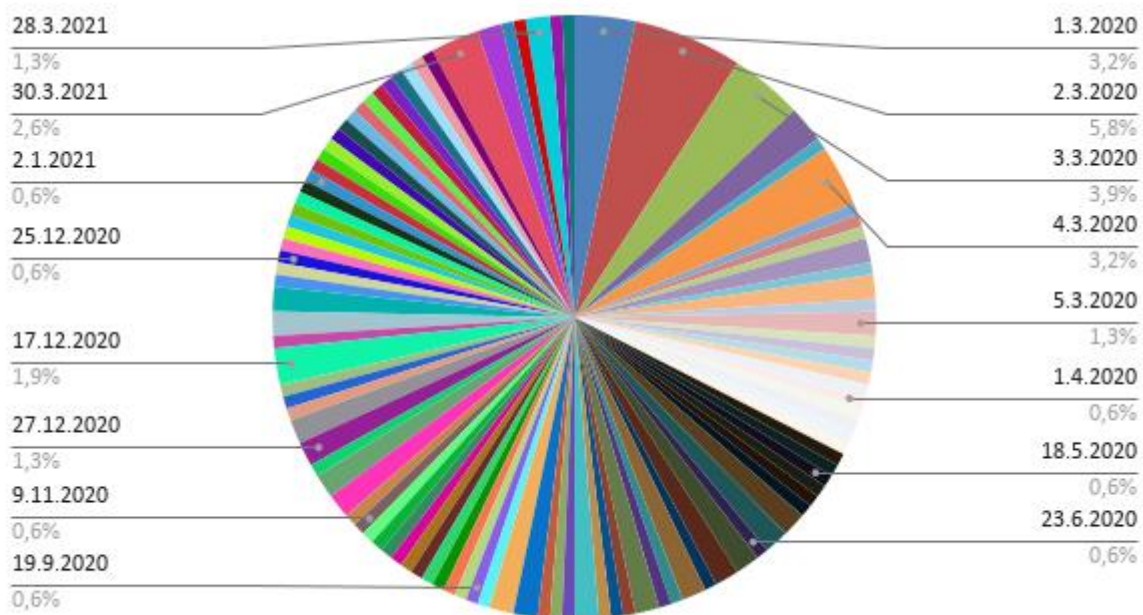
The subject sub-titles are health, resettlement, politics, condition, and others. Health is the main interest of this study, resettlement is a hot topic about refugees, politics is frequently the main motivator according to the previous studies as is mentioned above, the condition is added for the not directly health-related situation of refugees and other is used for all the other event-driven news as Gemi et al., (2013) stated. Attitude sub-titles are supportive, neutral, and hostile. Pandir et al., (2016) stated that Turkish media outlets are generally neutral or supportive. Yet, Gemi et al., (2013) stated the portrayal of immigrants can be shown as two extremes: very negative and hostile or very positive that it becomes unreal to comprehend. Therefore, I added these three sub-titles to the generally evaluated text and then deeply found out how extreme, pro-government, or impartial they are.

Empirical Findings

After analyzing the data, titles and sub-titles were categorized. These titles and sub-titles are explained above. Three different charts were created after this categorization process. These are date, subject, and attitude. In this chapter, these charts will be examined and will be interpreted.

Date

Chart 1: Dates of the news

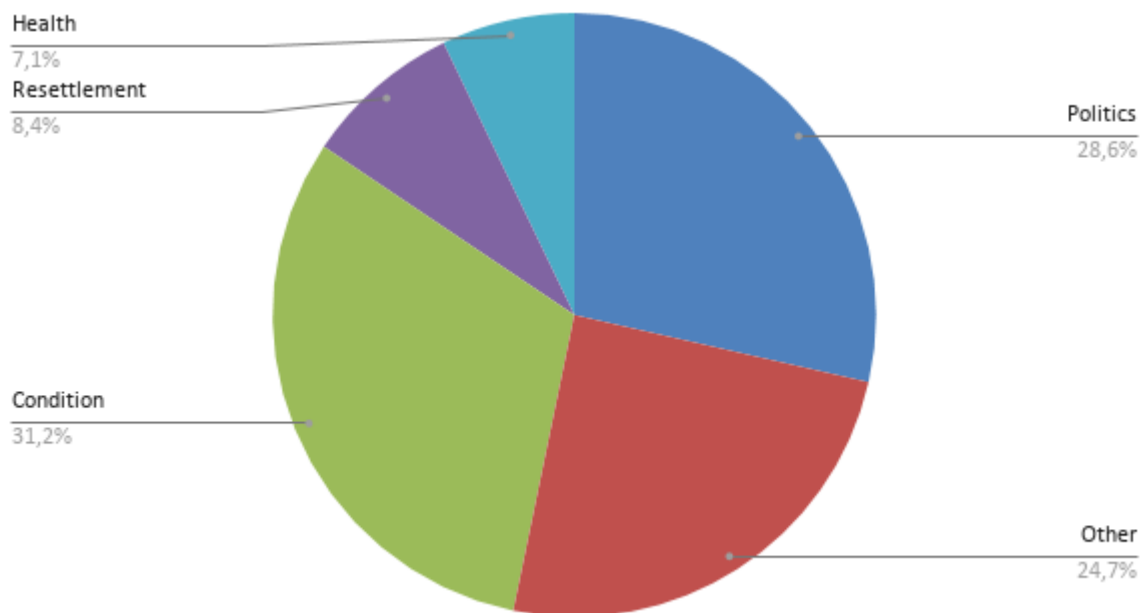


As can be seen in the chart, the most used days are the first days of March 2020. Although March 11, 2020, was the date for the announcement of the first official Covid-19 case for Turkey, data collection used March 1, 2020, as a first day, deliberately. This way, the chart shows how quickly the news media abandoned the Syrian refugees' issue. Once more, we can see how the media is choosing the news about refugees. When they are not extraordinary or event-driven anymore, they are quickly abandoned. It is obvious that similar to the world news, Turkish news also focused on Covid-19 and related topics as the situation became more serious. It is understandable since this was a pandemic. Even, to be fair, March 2020 was still the month that most news about Syrian refugees were produced. Public and the media were still not that focused on Covid-19 issues. But, the analysis of the first five days of March 2020, which are forming more than %15 of this chart and study, clearly shows that refugee-related news usually has a political agenda behind them. Topics go on a wide range about the Turkish government, European Union, United Nations, and so on. But the only health-related piece of news came at the near end of March, 30th. Evrensel.net, which is mostly known for left-wing and minority-friendly alignments, published this piece of news

about Syrian refugees and their health risks at repatriation centers. That was the only news which was health-related among 43 news of March 2020. The rest of them were mostly politics-related like the dynamic first days of March and some condition-related ones too. Almost all the other months except the last month of 2020 there was just five to ten news per month. The reason behind December 2020 news is clear, there are some general evaluations of Syrian refugees and politics about them since it is the last month of the year. Another month has shown larger than others here in the last month this paper analyzed, March 2021. There are only 12 news stories this month but they came on the same days as others. But, if we want to look at the positive side, they came on the 28th and 30th of March 2021, which are the last days. Maybe the news media is getting interested in refugee-related news again because of the fading Covid-19 news. Yet, none of the news that came in March 2021 were health-related.

Subject

Chart 2: Subjects of the news

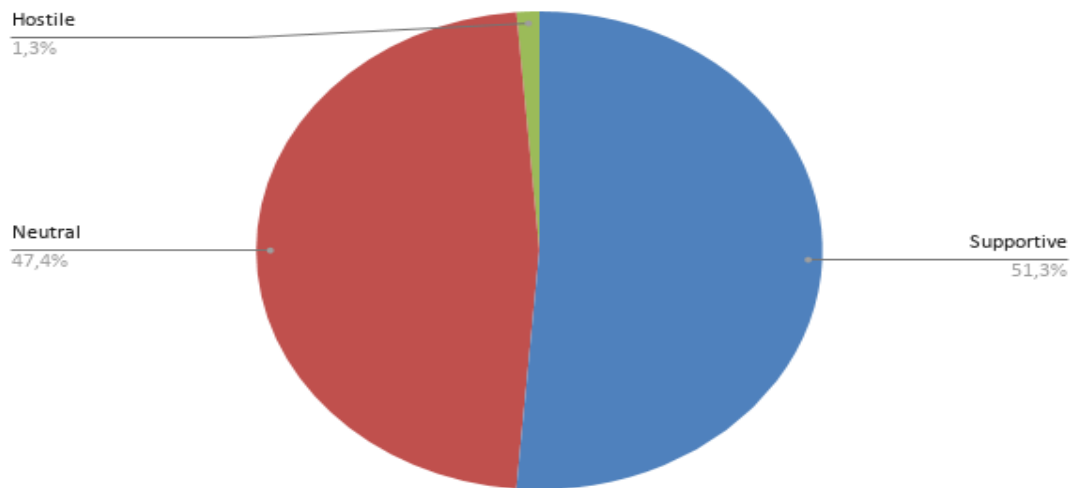


The subject chart indicates that even though this study is covering one year of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Turkey, there is an incredibly low amount of health-related news. Only 11 out of 154 news are directly related to health and Covid-19 related issues. There is also some news briefly including Syrian refugee health like one sentence or even less but they are not sufficient. The subject chart once more shows us that almost nobody is sincerely producing news about refugees. Health-related news is going to be examined more deeply but even purely political news is incredibly high in this chart also. Only condition-related news has a bigger pie than politics, which is normal. Condition-related news is featuring every problem Syrian refugees have except health. Employment, housing, food, etc., and even that pie of the chart is not very far away from politics. An example for condition-related news is 13.10.2020, Evrensel.net news headlined as *‘Refugee children were not wanted, they were*

transferred to separate school.” which exposed the education issue among refugee kids. Another big pie is the other. This is also pretty normal because this pie includes everything not entirely fitting other pies. It would not be surprising even another pie appears as a leading pie. An example for other news is Duvar’s 16.12.2020 dated news about journalist Fatih Altaylı’s statement about Syrian refugees called *“Hate speech against Syrian refugees by Fatih Altaylı”* which does not directly fit in any of the categories chosen. Resettlement still does not have a serious amount of news in Turkey. Yet, this subject is rising all over the world and has a bigger pie even more than health. An example of resettlement-related news is Amerika’nın Sesi, 17.11.2020 news called *“Will Syrians Return to Their Country?”* which is clearly about resettlement. Finally, politics are all over the studied news. Even in some other subjects, you can find the dust of politics. European Union and Turkey discussions, politician statements, and all other politically interpreted agreements about Syrian refugees. It seems like news outlets are talking more about refugee politics than actual refugees. It might be the outcome of the government’s refugee politics in Turkey. As I stated before, Turkey is hosting a large number of Syrian refugees and the Turkish government is frequently pulling that card. Most of the European Union agreements have been focused on Turkey and its highest number of Syrian Refugees. Politicians are always talking about how other countries are not helping them. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said a couple of times sentences like *“When we say, ‘We open the doors,’ they are in the stew. Don’t be in the stew. When the time comes, the doors will open. Let’s see how you can host hundreds of thousands. When 100 people go to Greece by sea, you call us on the phone, there are 4 million here, you don’t talk about them.”* (Euronews, 2019) As President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, himself hinted, this is a diplomatic card for Turkey. This is why Turkish politicians, foreign politicians, and international establishments frequently talk about this. This might be also why politics in the news are grabbing that high percentage of the pie. No matter which part of the political spectrum they might be, all newspapers will follow what high-ranking politicians are saying. Especially pro-government newspapers will follow and support their views. An example of politics-related news is Deutsche Welle’s 14.04.2020 news called *“Greece: Turkey carries refugees to the Aegean”* which is about Greek-Turkish tension regarding refugee-related policies.

Attitude

Chart 2: Attitudes of the news



This is the easiest chart to interpret since there are only three sub-titles. Similar to some previous studies, neutral and supportive attitudes towards refugees are the same. As mentioned multiple times, government influence on the media is a huge part of that. Similar studies conducted in Western countries found out that the media is a huge resource of hostile attitudes against refugees. Georgiou and Zaborowski's (2017) study about media coverage of the "refugee crisis" and Leudar et. al's study (2008) examining the hostile themes of refugee narratives are examples of such studies. That's why it might be surprising for other countries. Yet, this result is pretty obvious for Turkish citizens.

Also, these news sometimes exaggerated the positive image so much that it seems unreal. Refugees as portrayed as, desperate victims, angels running away from war. This kind of exaggerated news might again create a bad image. The public might feel like they need to help them forever and refugees are just vulnerable. An example of this kind of news is 12.04.2020 dated Birgün news called '*Fragile Lives: Syrian refugees in the days of Corona*' which is directly calling them fragile and showing them powerless. Also, there are crime-related news. This kind of news again usually victimized the refugees. Be the victim or not, they are becoming related to the crime in the society's mind and they are still vulnerable. Some people might like the "they are innocent angels" narrative but most of the social media don't agree with that as Kardeş et al., 2017 stated. Why social media and society are so separated from the media's supportive or neutral point of view even though media is incredibly effective in most cases is a big question in this situation. That can be explained by some researches such as social identity theory. For example, Göker & Keskin, (2016) stated that even if Syrians are described as victims of war, they are still marginalized. They found that society and the media still associated Syrian refugees with social problems, crimes, chaos, and conflict and making them an out-group. Therefore, social identity theory discusses that individuals strongly identify themselves with their group and their characteristics. They apply better attributes to the in-group and worst attributes to the out-group. (Turner & Oakes, 1986) So, when Turkish society and social media see the refugees as an out-group who need

help running away from war, chaos, and not one of them, they are turning against them. Therefore, media still has a huge impact but not the impact they want. That might help to understand why Turkish society and social media users are still acting hostile against refugees.

Besides supportive news, neutral news is also pretty common. This might be showing the wavering situation of Turkish news media between pro-government views and hostile views of Turkish social media users. But, to be fair, this kind of news generally comes from international news sources which are also publishing news in Turkey. Such as Euronews, BBC, Deutsche Welle. Those news are not inherently supportive or hostile, just simply sharing what happened. They are also highly interested in international politics such as Turkey and European Union disputes on refugee aid. An example of neutral news is 09.03.2020 Euronews news called *‘How much aid does an asylum seeker receive from the state in Germany?’* as dull as its headline, this article just gives information about the numbers, impartially.

As seen, hostile news is incredibly low. This might have happened because of nationalist affiliated news outlets. They seem to have completely forgotten refugees during the Covid-19 pandemic. Only two hostile news came through rarely-visited websites. One of them is a local news site from the city of Bursa and another one is a very little circulated website called Nethaber. The second one is a little bit surprising because it has an editor who has a pro-government tendency and has a newly revealed connection with the mafia. Yet, this piece of news is about Syrian refugees criticizing Turkey and that might be the reason why they had a hostile attitude towards them. NetHaber’s 02.03.2020 news called *‘Reactions rained down on the arrogant words of the Syrian refugee’* which directly called the refugee arrogant because of his criticism against Turkey. This news also has a spot stating *‘While most of the refugees who have lived in Turkey for many years are grateful for this; some lashed out.’* which is glorifying Turkey and indirectly, the government. Doing that, it minimized the number of complaining Syrian refugees without actual proof. Overall, this strengthens the idea of Turkish online news media being under the influence of the government and supporting refugees for their gain when they are supporting. They are also usually not publishing negative opinions of the Syrian refugees to conceal criticism against the government.

Health-Related News

As the sample of the subject, health-related news deserves to be analyzed more deeply. As mentioned before, there are only eleven health-related news stories. Only two of them are neutral and the rest of them are supportive. First of the neutral news is Tele1’s 18.04.2020 news called *‘Coronavirus aid from the USA to Syrian refugees in Turkey’* which includes politics as well and is loosely connected to Covid-19. Another one is Hürriyet’s 17.09.2020 news called *‘The rate of corona in Syrian refugees is very low’* which is quoting the words

of Gaziantep Mayor Fatma Şahin. One of the news articles is just giving information and another one is quoting a politician and the information she gives about Covid-19 and Syrian refugees. Supporting news is usually about how bad their condition gets with the Covid-19 pandemic. Similar to other Birgün news mentioned above, 01.04.2020, Birgün news is called *“Their ordeal is not over: the fear of the virus for Syrian refugees”* which might seem like sincerely discussing refugee health yet again showing refugees as completely powerless beings. That might backfire as mentioned above. Another issue with this particular news is that it is largely similar to other news articles mentioned above. Contexts are so similar that some might think they are the same news. Another similar news article coming from Evrensel, 08.06.2020., is called *“Refugee conditions worsened during the epidemic”* which has a similar quotation from Mohammed Saleh, President of the Syrian Refugees Association. Other than this left-oriented media’s over-positive news, there is also other not aiming Turkey over-positive news too. Anadolu Agency’s 26.01.2021 news article called *“The winter ordeal of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has been aggravated by Covid-19 and the economic crisis”* which is aimed at Syrian refugees not living in Turkey. Another health-related news coming from them is 02.04.2020 news article called *“Human Rights Watch: Lebanon discriminates against Syrian refugees in Covid-19 measures”* which criticize Lebanon and sympathizes with Syrian refugees who are living there. As known, Anadolu Agency is the historically state-run agency of the Turkish Republic. They are even called the ‘propaganda machine of the Turkish government’ by some foreign news outlets. (Vice, 2014) To be fair, some of the other Turkish news outlets are way too much propaganda-minded than Anadolu Agency. Yet, we saw that they were not checking Syrian refugees' health in Turkey but blaming Lebanon for poor care. It seems like an intentional move. They also used the word ‘ordeal’ and showed refugees as powerless victims. It seems like, again, health-related news is overly positive and politically oriented.

Conclusion

While checking Turkish online newspapers and their news about Syrian refugees during the Covid-19 Pandemic, this study revealed that even though the news is usually written with a positive or neutral attitude, they still carry some major problems. Most importantly they always carry politically oriented views. They are usually not sincere about the actual problems of refugees. They are just using them to justify their ideology and power. Even just checking Birgün and Anadolu Agency news might help to see the political agenda behind them. Birgün, who is known for its leftist alignments, might discuss Syrian refugee health sincerely but also criticize the government every chance they get. To be fair, this criticism might also occur because of their will to help refugees, but their political agenda is still visible. Anadolu Agency on the other hand, who are known for their closeness with the government, throw away the ball from Turkey’s field. Within the health-related news or others, they hide the negative situations from Turkey. They criticized Lebanon on Covid-19 measures but did not talk about Turkey, Covid-19, and Syrian refugees. Most of the news outlets seem polarized massively. Another problem is most of the news showed all the refugees as helpless, powerless victims while trying to enhance the refugee image. But they

are overly positive and as Gemi et al., (2013) stated that might be dangerous. That might also help the social identity theories' creating the out-group. Overall, though the news seems largely positive or neutral, they have undeniable problems. They did not have a decent amount of health-related news while we had an all-year of pandemic also. Sincerity is questionable and political agendas are everywhere. Checking the writings and their conclusions and writing more impartially might help that. Critical discourse analysis of some news might help expand the findings of the topic and help us understand the background and context behind these news articles.

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