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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Intergroup Contact Among Syrians in Japan: A Third Place to Reconsider Pre-Existing Prejudices

Dania Alakkad[1*], Parkpoom Kuanvinit[2]

[1]Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan.
Email: dania1tayfour6alakkad@gmail.com
[2]International Institute for Sustainability with Knotted Chiral Meta Matter (WPI-SKCM[2]), Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan.
Email: parkpoom.ku@gmail.com

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):
Dania Alakkad
(dania1tayfour6alakkad@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

Intergroup contact theory posits that encountering people from different social groups reduces prejudices under certain conditions. Hundreds of studies investigate the contact effect in varying social contexts, leading to new directions in theory application. We advance this development by exploring how prejudice unfolds in a third place of optimal contact conditions. Applying the perspective of multiple group memberships, we depict Syrian migrants in Japan as multiple social groups and search for everyday experiences of contact among Syrian subgroups. Through a qualitative analysis of five semi-structured interviews, the present study reveals three types of prejudice and highlights different patterns of intergroup contact. We argue that the dimension of prejudice interplays with contact conditions. Japan's social climate is effective in reducing mutable prejudices on the dimensions of politics and structural disparities. However, religious prejudice decreases only when contact does not clash with the interactants' value system, and the reduction of internalised prejudice is primarily contingent upon intragroup cooperation.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of the very few studies that have qualitatively investigated intergroup contact among migrants originally from a conflict-affected country, recognising their multiple group memberships. It contributes to the existing literature by offering new insights into the interplay between intergroup contact conditions and prejudice forms, expanding the focus of current research to understudied dimensions, including perceived political stance and internalised prejudice.

1. Introduction

People strive to identify themselves in distinctive social groups during times of uncertainty, creating psychological barriers to connect with those perceived as outsiders (Hogg, 2023). One of these barriers is the phenomenon of holding affections against

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members of a particular social group based on a generalised judgement, which lacks rational evidence (Duckitt, 2019). This phenomenon is known as prejudice.

While no utopian models exist, examining policies of prejudice reduction in developed countries reveals that social harmony is a collective effort. For example, racial desegregation projects in the United States (Pettigrew, 1998) and the programs to empower Aboriginal communities in Australia and Canada illustrate that improving social relations begins with recognising and embracing diverse social identities, rather than suppressing them (Lalonde et al., 2016; Law & Mackenzie, 2016).

Syrian social identities are an intertwined mixture of ethnicity, religion, region, ideology, and class. The intricate interplay of identities has always posed challenges for those seeking to study Syria's complex social dynamics. This article aims to explore the dynamics of intergroup contact within a small fraction of Syrian society – the diasporic Syrian community in Japan.

Syria was home to numerous ancient civilisations. The relics of the Aramean, Greek, Roman, early Islamic Caliphate, and other early cultures continue to attract tourists and historians from different parts of the world. The history of Syria has nurtured a complex and rich multicultural fabric, encompassing diverse ethnicities and religious groups. The country was a destination for forcibly displaced refugees from the Eastern Mediterranean region, the Balkans, and the Caucasus during the Ottoman Empire's late rule. Asylum seekers who settled in Syria include Palestinians, Iraqis, Lebanese, Armenians, Circassians, Chechens, Assyrians, Albanians, and other persecuted religious minorities from neighbouring countries (Chatty, 2017). Besides communities of refugee background, the demarcation of the Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran's borders in 1916 has left the Kurds behind; they became a persecuted minority on their divided land.

After the Arab Spring revolutions, Syria shifted from a country that hosts refugees to a key origin country for the displaced population (Chatty, 2017). Syrian divides received much attention in the media and political studies after the bloody escalation of the 2011 street uprisings. Rival parties recruited their members along sectarian and ethnic lines, which provided unavoidable differentiations and greater commitment by the fighters (Hinnebusch, 2019). Human rights violations deepened the friction and polarised the society between proponents of the former Assad dictatorship and its opponents (Worrall & Hightower, 2021). This binary was inadvertently endorsed in peace talks, despite the engagement of civil society representatives. Hellmüller (2024) points out that inclusivity norms in peace initiatives differed from locals' vision. Therefore, the representative of civil society could not reveal critical local distinctions, including conservatism, liberalism, religiosity, and secularism. This obscuration hindered the genuine representation of civil society in peacebuilding initiatives.

Mainstream immigration studies that adopt intergroup contact theory have been ignoring Syrians' fragmentation in their analyses. Syrians are depicted as one social group of refugees from the perspectives of their host communities. Such conceptualisation is valuable for supporting the psychological and social well-being of Syrian refugees (Smeekes et al., 2017), investigating prejudice against them (Bye, 2020), and discovering the patterns of their social interactions with host communities (Koc & Anderson, 2018). However, categorisation based on nationality of origin is only one layer of social reality, which is insufficient to explain complex social interactions in the everyday life of migrants and refugees.

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Applying the perspective of multiple group memberships, this article depicts Syrian migrants as multiple groups. We are interested in studying interactions among Syrian subgroups in Japan, deemed as a third space for intergroup interactions. A similar study investigates intergroup contact among Liberian ethnic groups in a refugee camp in Ghana (De Tezanos-Pinto et al., 2017). This unusual focus aims to explore the dynamics of social interactions within communities devastated by conflict, as they adapt to new contact conditions provided by their new sanctuary. Although generalisation is beyond the methodological capacity of this study, understanding patterns of contact within the diverse Syrian community in diaspora paves the way for comprehensive research on prejudice reduction under varying naturalistic social contexts.

Japan constitutes an interesting place to study such interactions due to its controversial refugee policy, which left many Syrians of refugee background out of this system. Almasri (2020) points out a previous strict implementation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its protocol in Japan, resulting in a smaller scale of granting refugee status, compared to other G7 countries. Although Japan has shifted towards greater openness in dealing with geopolitical challenges that started in 2021 (Rehm, 2024), the number of Syrians residing in Japan remains limited. According to the statistics published by the Japanese Immigration Services Agency, as of December 2024, 1,711 Syrians resided in Japan, of whom only 23 were recognised as refugees (Japanese Ministry of Justice, 2024). The remainder hold diverse residence bases, including professionals, students, workers, and dependents. To sum up, the legal basis of residence in Japan denotes that the Syrians' stay is expected to be temporary, and their presence is not a resettlement plan. This situation, combined with integration challenges, have compelled many Syrians to cooperate with each other in many aspects of life, including information transfer and translation (Almasri, 2020).

From another angle, Japan provides a set of intergroup contact conditions that drastically differ from those in Syria, for instance, equal status and the rule of law. Studying the patterns of cooperation and contact among Syrians can contribute to intergroup contact literature from a naturalistic context of Syrians' temporary residence in Japan.

The main question of present study is how the differing conditions of contact in a third place influence pre-existing prejudices among migrants originally from a conflict-affected country. Additionally, three sub-questions arise here: 1) What are the common prejudices exchanged among Syrian subgroups?; 2) What are the dimensions of these prejudices?; and 3) How does intergroup contact in Japan change these prejudices?

To answer the above questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Syrian residents in Japan. Due to the insufficient accounts on Syrian divisions in previous research, we engage the participants in identifying the social context of their contact, using their imaginaries of the social world among Syrians. Their imaginaries constitute a departure point for our inquiries into the dynamics of contact among the Syrian community in Japan. Our approach engages interviewees of diverse social backgrounds to identify psychological barriers to social harmony beyond politicised narratives of divisions in Syria.

The following section of the literature review will trace the development of intergroup contact theory until its relevant stream, which focuses on conflict-affected societies and contact in a third place. Then, we will explain research methods and data analysis in

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details. The findings and data interpretation and discussion will follow. The final section will conclude the article and highlight this work's strengths and limitations, with recommendations for future research on intergroup contact in a third place.

2. Literature Review

Looking at social relations from the applied perspective, intergroup contact theory captures the inverse relationship between actual contact and prejudice. The theory's central premise establishes a general rule in social psychology: positive contact correlates with reduced prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This section will delve into the evolution of intergroup contact theory, its practical applications, contrasting findings, critiques, and emerging directions.

Early contact studies challenged the traditional belief that intergroup encounters inevitably result in resentment or conflict. They advocated for social cohesion aligned with emerging global human rights principles, particularly equality. As a result, early contact scholars concentrated their efforts on addressing the ethnic and racial segregation that had prevailed in the United States (Allport, 1954; Williams, 1947). Allport (1954) sets the departure point for intergroup contact research in a landmark book titled "*The Nature of Prejudice*". The author posits that intergroup contact in a supportive social atmosphere can reduce prejudice under the condition that prejudice is not ingrained in the personalities of individuals involved. According to Allport's framework, contact is just one situational factor within the broader dynamics of prejudice. Therefore, the type of prejudice, as well as individually perceived values, should be taken into account when analysing the contact effect. For example, religious prejudice tends to increase when religion is perceived primarily as a means to maximise sociocultural benefits of group membership. This trend is evident even in secular societies that have moved beyond theocratic systems (Allport, 1967).

The "*contact hypothesis*" has captivated the attention of Allport's successive researchers, who sought to identify the features of the social environment which support positive intergroup contact and mitigate prejudice. Pettigrew (1998), for instance, synthesises Allport's insights into a set of optimal contact conditions, including equal social status, shared goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority support for contact. He further expands Allport's framework on situational factors by emphasising additional predictors of contact effects, such as societal norms, individual traits, contact frequency, and the representativeness of interactants to their groups. Pettigrew contends that typicality and the salience of group membership facilitate the generalisation of positive interpersonal interactions to intergroup perceptions (Pettigrew, 1998). Hewstone (2009) supports the latter argument in direct contact when the context facilitates friendship formation. Additionally, the author broadly associates indirect contact with advancements in intergroup relations.

Intergroup contact is defined as the "*actual face-to-face interaction between members of clearly defined groups*" (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, p. 754). The mentioned groups are defined through their functions in society. For example, co-ethnicity provides socialising mechanisms including communication skills, and even punishment for unacceptable behaviour (Habyarimana et al., 2009). Nonetheless, intended groups are not exclusively confined to one's inherited ethnic group, as prejudice is observed in different forms of social groups, such as gender, race, regional and national. Prejudice also shows in contexts of multiple group memberships and complex social situations. For instance,

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prejudice can persist across generations, affecting descendants of migrants who follow various patterns of transnationalism, possess multiple loyalties, and show complex trajectories of group identification (Wessendorf, 2013).

A long list of empirical studies confirms contact theory and proposes a nuanced design for contact to function. For example, three surveys were conducted to study prejudice against foreign residents in East and West Germany (Wagner et al., 2003). The surveys show alignment between local attitudes and two patterns of intergroup contact; the first captures ethnic prejudice in areas of limited presence of foreigners. While the second reveals less prejudice, where a larger number of foreigners reside. The authors conclude that prejudice reduction occurred in places with greater opportunities to develop intergroup friendships. Another study in Israel shows that contact between similar groups can reduce ingroup bias in less relevant aspects of the group's standards (Roccas & Schwartz, 1993).

Contrary to the results highlighted above, several empirical studies report negative effect and observations contradict contact theory. For example, scholars show a direct correlation between contact and prejudice. This means that contact also has the potential to affirm stereotypes and increase prejudice (Binder et al., 2009). Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) ascribe inconsistent interpretations of research findings to the imbalanced rapid growth of theory, leaving the topic of barriers to positive contact without sufficient study. Another wave of scepticism points out that the perceived importance of contact lacks consensus among contact scholars (Van Dick et al., 2004). Moreover, contact can reduce prejudice even when contact is not in optimal conditions (Telaku, 2021). Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) respond to the mentioned concerns that Allport's conditions are not an exclusive prescription for prejudice reduction but rather function collectively to facilitate successful contact and buffer negative outcomes.

Dixon et al. (2005) highlight another critique, pointing to the lack of clarity regarding generalisation dynamics. They raise the question of when contact experiences improve the image of outgroups who did not personally engage in contact, especially for prejudiced people who avoid contact in the first place. Testing generalisability is a cornerstone of contact discussions. As part of this debate, Pettigrew (1998) identifies two optimal strategies for contact generalisation: decategorisation, which entails low conformity to the group's characteristics, and recategorisation, which conditions conformity. Establishing friendships with typical outgroups moderates the extension from interpersonal to intergroup attitudes. However, spontaneous intergroup friendships take time to form through repeated contact. Thus, Pettigrew (1998) recommends conducting longitudinal studies to test the generalisability of contact experience from interpersonal to intergroup. From another angle, Paolini et al. (2024) caution against potential detrimental outcomes of voluntary intergroup contact since it can increase prejudice more than positive contact can reduce it. According to the authors, bad contact's generalisability is stronger than good contact because individuals tend to resample good experiences before individual-to-group generalisation. However, the resampling step is risky in the context of bad experiences, so group members adopt the new negative information without adequate detection, which accelerates generalisation (Paolini et al., 2024). This process regenerates prejudices since discarding the confirmation step before generalisation is the starting point of prejudice's failure of rationality.

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Another popular critique is that classic optimal contact conditions disregard reality. Evidence reveals that participants may construct a different understanding of contact experience and develop informal segregation inside a desegregated context (Dixon et al., 2005). Additionally, the authors note that while contact may reduce cognitive prejudice, it does not always translate into meaningful social change towards equality, such as encounters between males and females. Along the same line of critique, Hassler et al. (2021) argue that intergroup contact can weaken support for collective action against social inequalities. While positive intergroup contact brings a sense of satisfaction with intergroup harmony, this satisfaction may lessen the willingness of disadvantaged groups to challenge intergroup inequalities because of the "*sedative effect*" of contact. To balance harmony and equality, the authors propose a carefully designed contact model that incorporates social change moderators.

Despite accumulated critiques, the contributions of contact literature to social psychology are undeniable. Recognising its importance, scholars call for more rigorous research and testing of the theory, advocating for new orientations. Dixon et al. (2005) demand that contact researchers revisit the claimed outcome of social change through a comparative methodology that investigates "*[W]hen, why and how contact succeeds or fails*" (p. 707). Other researchers propose a new direction that bridges the gap between theory and practice. For example, there is a call to approximate real-life naturalistic situations by considering the role of multiple group memberships in the dynamics of contact and prejudice (Grigoryan et al., 2022). We lean towards the latter strand of constructive critiques in designing the framework of this study.

Contact theory has expanded to varied geographical areas, research settings, and contexts, using varying research methods. Meta-analysis of 515 studies in 38 countries conducted between 1940 and 2000 reveals that geographic areas of studies do not receive equal attention from intergroup contact researchers (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). For instance, 71 % of the studies are conducted in the United States, while contact research in the Middle East is absent, except for studies conducted in Israel (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Since most intergroup research aims for greater social cohesion in developed countries or to sustain peace in post-conflict settings, it is unsurprising that societies of ongoing conflict receive less attention. They roughly constitute 19.07 % of intergroup contact studies, according to another meta-analysis (Paolini et al., 2024).

An intergroup contact study in a conflict-ridden country observes that prejudice between groups of hostile relations persists, compared to contact in other settings. Nevertheless, repetitive contact can enhance emotions and behaviour (Scacco & Warren, 2018). Contact between conflicting groups has the potential to reduce anxiety, although it does not change negative emotions towards the outgroup's narratives about the conflict (Telaku, 2021). Another study reports a change of attitudes between Palestinian and Israeli students of Hebrew University, highlighting the role of contact in the process (Faibish et al., 2024). Hebrew University offers avenues for spontaneous encounters and joint social activities across asymmetric social divides. It provides a platform to test pre-existing imaginaries of the other and enhances community relations accordingly. The findings reveal positive emotions and perceptions of peace, although this case lacks many of the benefits often provided by a third place. A third place is defined by earlier study as the space that allows for spontaneous, informal congregations, in which participants equally enjoy democratic expressions of their individualities; it is diverse enough to satisfy human needs to have rich social experiences (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Through lively interactions, people test their understanding of social

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constructions beyond the structured world they lived in before. A study of contact between Liberian refugees in a refugee camp in Ghana confirms the merits of contact in a third place (De Tezanos-Pinto et al., 2017). The latter study associates inter-ethnic contact with the propensity to trust, empathise and forgive other groups, which is important for post-war reconciliation.

As shown above, intergroup contact has the potential to pave the way towards rethinking relations and progressing mutual understanding between conflict divides when these interactions naturally occur in a neutral third place. Yet, these potentials are understudied among Syrian migrants and refugees. This study bridges this gap by exploring the development of Syrian-Syrian contact in the new Japanese social environment.

3. Methods

The present study follows a qualitative approach designed to collect retrospective accounts of intergroup contact that reflect participants' everyday lived realities. This approach is compatible with the topic we are exploring and our related inquiries. We explore the impact of intergroup contact in a third place from the perspectives of bystanders, perceivers, and targets of pre-existing prejudice. This exploration falls under social psychology, which is the science of ever-changing knowledge about social order. The knowledge we seek evolves over time and across cultural contexts (Severy et al., 1976). It surrounds human social actions, which are formed by motives, values, and subjective interpretations of the meaning of life. This context exposes us to subjective, sensitive data influenced by numerous biases, which necessitates the use of qualitative tools to manage underlying complexities (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

This research took place in Hiroshima prefecture in Japan, and included participants from Hokkaido, Tokyo, Kobe, and Hiroshima. Such geographical diversity provides rich narratives about intergroup contact and helps limit potential bias towards certain social environments in Japan.

Our study targeted the population of Syrian migrants in Japan, considering the diversity of their original social backgrounds across multiple dimensions. Given the political tension over intergroup relations in Syria and interviewees' concerns, we aimed for a small sample size of only five interviews to encourage larger participation in future research. Although the sample is not representative, this study is important for introducing intergroup contact concepts to a population that remains largely understudied in the literature. Our sampling methods also take this sensitive context into account. Firstly, we utilised convenience sampling (Golzar et al., 2022) to invite accessible participants. Secondly, we applied snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) to approach participants from diverse social backgrounds. The sample includes distinct perspectives of five interviewees, reflecting diversity in gender, age, educational attainment, city of origin in Syria, city of residence in Japan, religion, and levels of religiosity. The participants exhibited varied perceptions of their stay in Japan and demonstrated differing interests in socialising overall. All participants reported experiencing war trauma, which may have implications for the interpretation of the effect of intergroup contact (De Tezanos-Pinto et al., 2017).

We have chosen the method of face-to-face semi-structured interviews for data collection, following the guidelines suggested by Punch (2005) to ensure appropriate

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design, thorough preparation and rigorous implementation. Additionally, we incorporate online interviews to provide better accessibility and inclusiveness, enabling participation from individuals across different regions in Japan. A semi-structured interview is a pre-planned dialogue, which allows flexibility and reliability in collecting elaborative and in-depth responses (Naz et al., 2022). It corresponds with inquiries on sensitive topics that demand trust and confidentiality, providing tools to steer the direction of conversations while ensuring the content remains autonomous (Gillham, 2000). An extensive review of qualitative methodological literature highlights that semi-structured interviews surpass other techniques in case-study research, particularly for acquiring non-representative yet robust data, specifically within a limited research capacity (Ruslin et al., 2022).

However, self-reported contact provides data susceptible to numerous biases. These include discrepancies between words and deeds, recall bias, and responses influenced by social desirability (Keil et al., 2020; Severy et al., 1976). To mitigate such biases, we adopted measures proposed in prior methodological research. For instance, we avoided framing interview questions in ways that suggest specific answers are more desirable than others. Also, we designed particular questions to assess the reliability of data and their alignment with our interpretation. Finally, we practised techniques to enhance our interviewing skills, encouraging open, discursive responses in a natural atmosphere (Gillham, 2000). Each interview ranged from 70 to 120 minutes in duration. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, recorded using a smartphone audio recorder, and transcribed within 48 hours. Descriptions, memos and explanations are clearly differentiated in transcripts. We employed artificial intelligence tools to ensure neutral translation, followed by checks for accuracy (Kowal & O'Connell, 2004).

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Consensus coding was performed, and MAXQDA software was used to organise, retrieve, and display codes (Kelle, 2004; Radiker & Kuckartz, 2020).

This social study has the approval of the Research Ethics Review Board of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Hiroshima University. Our ethical procedures include briefing participants about the research topic, objectives and methods. We provided participants with a thorough explanation of their rights during the study, the voluntary basis of their participation, and the measures taken to handle their confidential information. All important details, including contact information, were provided in writing to the participants before the interview. Consent was obtained, digitally documented, and stored in a password-protected file on the first author's personal computer.

We now turn to present the main themes that emerged from our analysis.

4. Results

We found three forms of common prejudices among Syrians, targeting multiple social affiliations. They are: political stance prejudice, disparities-related prejudice, and moral prejudice. The mentioned prejudices affect clearly defined social groups of inflexible boundaries such as the prejudices against ethnic, religious, regional, political, and economic groups; they also operate against social groups of higher permeability such as prejudices attached to one's educational attainment and livelihood system – nomadic, rural and urban lifestyles; and they target intersecting groups, for instance, prejudices

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against merchants and working women. The interviewees' reference to prejudice reflects what they encounter, not what they endorse. Some perspectives align with personal backgrounds, like gender, origin, or religion. Thus, perceptions of prejudice vary; what is considered serious in one narrative is dismissed in another. The following subsections present each prejudice and the way contact in Japan changes it in detail.

4.1. Political stance prejudice

Most participants affirm that political divisions are Syrians' most prominent drivers of biases. Although the remaining participants skip political divisions when discussing prejudice, their narratives indirectly inform our findings. For instance, A. Atasi states,
"*Political stance has turned into something like intense feelings of hatred. So, it doesn't fall under prejudices. Prejudices are something someone grows up with, then develops a certain opinion about. So... yeah, I don't think I can discuss it in the same way or put it in the same category.*" (personal communication, April 21, 2025)

Resentment stemming from political divides results from a real conflict with tangible outcomes. Therefore, negative feelings against those who hold an opposing political stance go beyond the focus of prejudice. However, upon closer examination and comparison with other narratives, the described affection of "*intense feelings of hatred*" expands to non-political social divisions through a web of problematic correlations. These correlations transfer hatred from a real conflict context to a highly prejudiced one. They flag the presence of prejudiced attributions of political position. Political stance misattribution occurs when a group of people is thought to adopt a political position based on insufficient evidence.

We trace a problematic link between the political conflict and sectarian and regional tensions in our narratives. Firstly, a remarkable shift in contact across regional and sectarian divides coincided with the beginning of the street uprisings in 2011. Secondly, political stances within each sect varied even among family members, which contradicts the mentioned attitude shift and suggests the failure of its rationality.

From another angle, prejudiced attributions of political stance overlook diverse political positions beyond the polarised binary of supporting the revolution or supporting the former dictatorship. For instance, an anti-war position emerges in our narratives, as one interviewee recalls numerous anecdotes that underscore political stance prejudice. Lastly, the oversimplified binary of political division disregards the extrinsic value of expressed alignments, which offered limited means to survive poverty and oppression during the war.

4.2. The contact effect on political stance prejudice

The practice of political stance prejudice diminishes in the everyday lived experiences of Syrian migrants in the following contexts. Firstly, although heightened encounters occasionally occur, our data shows that many Syrian migrants are reluctant to engage in contentious political discussions in Japan. This tendency limits the influence of political stance on everyday social relations. Four participants assert that political stance prejudice has lost its significance. One example of this progress is intergroup attitude at work. Japan provides opportunities for intergroup contact in professional workplaces, where Syrians set aside their political division, avoiding provocative discussions and exclusionary attitudes, as N. Tahan clarifies, "*So we reached the conclusion that, brother,*

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enough, don't talk – let's stick to our work, let's stay focused on our work, that's it." (personal communication, March 28, 2025).

Secondly, prejudiced attribution of political stance as a mechanism to survive hostilities has lost its urgency; the equal protection of rights under the neutral Japanese law decreases mistrust and politics-driven prejudices against other religious and sectarian groups. However, this progress does not extend to intergroup relations in Syria, where interactions lack the condition of "*equal group status*".

Thirdly, migration to Japan helps intergroup trust building, particularly among those of an anti-war position, as it signals migrants' lack of interest in engaging in conflict.

We observe a convergence in interactants' imaginaries of the Syrian social world when Assad was overthrown in late 2024. The celebrations encouraged peaceful intergroup exchange of political views, and dialogue replaced prejudiced attributions of political alignment. The following narrative clarifies the impact of the political change on political openness and intergroup dialogue in Japan:

> *"So, any topic related to the war, in most cases, I avoid. There might have been an exception when the regime fell, as that was entirely unexpected in every respect. It prompted us to reflect on certain matters, even if they were painful."* (W. Alshami, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Unfortunately, sectarian tension, attacks on civilians and revenge killings resurged in Syria while we were collecting our data (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2025). The intergroup political openness experienced in the early days of the liberation is at a pivotal juncture due to the recurring unrest, adding to the limitations of our findings.

4.3. Disparities-related prejudice

Developmental disparities between Syria's major cities and other marginalised areas emerge as the second driver of prejudice in our study. The narratives reveal many stereotypes and numerous prejudices against the dwellers of less developed regions in Syria. For example, J. Altaweel refers to a stereotype related to educational disparities between the city and countryside: "*Syrian society often generalises, saying things like all villagers are uneducated farmers.*" (personal communication, March 19, 2025).

Disparities-related prejudice leads to avoidance behaviour in extreme cases, reducing contact across regional divides. It confuses underdevelopment with simple-mindedness and incivility, creating a sense of resentment and social hierarchy. On the other hand, there is a positive reaction to this prejudice, which triggered upward social mobility, as J. Altaweel continues,

> "*The entire generation aimed to show that they were educated, civilised, and not just rural folks or simple farmers. There was a noticeable increase in university students from …, many excelling in prestigious fields with competitive ambitions.*" (personal communication, March 19, 2025).

Regrettably, this progress was disrupted. The war hardships prompted survival behaviour, particularly in poor and marginalised areas, affecting the image of locals

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there. As a result, disparities-related prejudice surfaced prominently with the increasing war-induced economic inequalities. In addition, we observe that economic disparities and political grievances are not necessarily interconnected. Our data suggests that politically advantaged groups can be economically less advantaged and be subjected to prejudice and mistreatment, as B. Habib clarifies,

> "*I mentioned those two categories [Sunnis and merchants] as an example, you know? But definitely, you could say that almost all groups in Syria, regardless of their sect, social class, or educational background, faced mistreatment."* (personal communication, March 11, 2025).

4.4. The contact effect on disparities-related prejudice

In Japan, prejudice linked to pre-existing disparities among Syrians develops in three distinct patterns. It decreases in some intergroup contact cases, sustains in others, or transforms its emphasis in ways that affect a different type of prejudice.

The well-developed provision of services and a sense of economic comfort in Japan have allowed behaviour change from survival-oriented coping mechanisms to more social engagement and a friendly attitude. Nevertheless, many migrants continue to hold onto old prejudices for psychological reasons. For instance, biases that idealise the "*purity*" of being from a renowned city may serve as a way of resisting the new realities of displacement and the loss of significant pre-war social status.

Finally, prejudices related to educational disparities has lessened. However, there is a disagreement about when this decline occurred. One interviewee attributes it to the war, which disrupted the education of many Syrians. Another believes the decline took place in Japan. Regardless, the distinction between the educated and non-educated takes a new form in Japan, influencing the next type of prejudice to be discussed. The new emphasis centres on a differentiation between well-integrated long timers and poorly integrated newcomers.

4.5. Moral prejudice

The last type of prejudice affects women, merchants, and people of different religious affiliations. For instance, the prejudice against women targets the sexual morality of those who are working, divorced, or widows; merchants are depicted as exploiters of people in dire need during the war. Although all the participants in this study denounce religious prejudice, the narratives reveal that claims of religious superiority and associated derogatory practices affect the formation and continuation of friendships across religious groups.

Moral prejudice can also be internalised, manifesting as derogatory speech against one's own group. This case is explained in the following narrative:

> *"When I first came here, or even before coming, I used to hear a lot from Syrians who had migrated to Western countries, like Europe, about their bad experiences dealing with other Syrians. For example, they would say, 'Stay away from Syrians. No one harms us more than Syrians harm each other', and so on."* (B. Habib, personal communication, March 11, 2025).

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This speech targets all Syrian diasporic communities. It precedes intergroup contact experiences in Japan. However, contact seems to change pertaining thoughts, as we will discuss next.

4.6. The contact effect on moral prejudice

The limited narratives presented in this study fall short of providing information about the intergroup contact effect on prejudices against women and merchants. However, the data points out various outcomes on religious prejudice and derogatory speech generalised against one's own social group. Moral prejudice in Japan decreases in some individual cases, while increases in others.

All respondents report establishing cross-religion friendships with other Syrians in Japan. They describe varying degrees of intimacy, satisfaction and trust within these relationships. For instance, W. Alshami notes,

> "*[M]ost of my interactions have been with JICA students. And again, there wasn't any discrimination. JICA students came from various cities and backgrounds, and in the instances I met them, no one treated me differently based on my region or religion. I was just considered another student from Syria. Conversations were normal and inclusive.*" (personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Japan's multicultural policies allow Syrians to maintain their cultural values and religious identities without fear of persecution. For instance, the government allows them to build religious places and resume cultural practices. According to one participant, this sense of cultural freedom alleviates pre-existing intergroup tension stemming from religious prejudice and facilitates the formation of intergroup friendships accordingly. However, cross-religion friendships are sometimes interrupted due to increasing awareness about cultural differences. A new challenge to maintain social identity particularly appears in the realm of child-rearing. We capture this challenge in three interviews. Some participants point out concerns about Syrian children's social identity in Japan, while others complain about the reaction of concerned parents. They accentuate intergroup differences and reinforce biases to help their children adopt their cultural lifestyles. The narratives suggest a clash between the cultural interest of maintaining original identity in Japan and optimal intergroup contact. As noted in one narrative, integration into the Japanese host society helps reconcile this clash and increases the willingness to engage in intergroup contact with Syrians of different cultural affiliations.

The same observation applies to the prejudice against one's own group. Internalised prejudice is captured against the diasporic Syrian community in general and against the members of one's subgroup, reflecting a severe fragmentation on multiple layers. Three interviewees express hopelessness regarding this reality. Nevertheless, the sense of becoming a minority in Japan brings a positive change according to two interviewees; derogatory speech against one's own group reduces, shifting attitude from caution to appreciation and behaviour from avoidance to cooperation, as B. Habib states,

> "*Yes, there are negative cases, but overall, I really liked our relationships with each other as Syrians in Japan. It felt like we had created a sort of support system for one another. Many times when I needed help, I found*

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> *several people willing to help me, both individuals and families from different groups.*" (personal communication, March 11, 2025).

After presenting common prejudices among Syrians and how they changed in Japan, we now turn to discuss the findings in the following section.

5. Discussion

Prejudice can be either a manifestation of a problematic development of personality or a collective phenomenon that is comparable across national borders (Allport, 1954; Quillian, 1995). This study is concerned with the latter focus; however, we recognise the entanglement of these distinctions on the one hand, and the correlation of prejudice forms on the other. Previous research confirms a generalised attitude of prejudice; prejudice against a particular group correlates with prejudice against other groups (Allport, 1954). However, the strength of this correlation varies, revealing context-related clusters of prejudices (Meeusen & Kern, 2015). For example, Meeusen and Kern (2015) find that the correlation between sexism and anti-gay prejudice is quite high in the Netherlands, while the correlation between anti-gay and anti-migrant prejudice is much weaker in the same country. The authors assert that "*prejudices should not only be studied within particular countries, but also with regard to the specific target group, which requires good knowledge of the historic, cultural and contemporary intergroup context in each country*" (p. 11).

Our findings are rich in context-specific data, revealing three forms of prejudice; each is associated with a different effect of contact. The first is Political stance prejudice, which occurs when someone infers others' political positions based on generalisations lacking objective evidence. This form of prejudice seems to mitigate in Japan, losing both significance and urgency in Syrian migrants' everyday interactions, and allowing for trust building, especially among people of an anti-war stance. The second prejudice is related to developmental disparities. The dwellers of less developed areas in Syria are prejudiced against and stereotyped as simple-minded and uncivilised. A reported sense of social hierarchy affects people's decisions to engage in contact with outgroups. In Japan, disparities-related prejudice generally lessens due to the greater economic comfort and relatively fair provision of public services. However, the prejudice persists in some cases as a way of resisting the new realities of displacement and the loss of significant pre-war social status. Prejudices related to educational disparities also lessen as the focus transforms from differentiation between well-educated and uneducated into a differentiation between well-integrated long timers and poorly integrated newcomers. The latter affects the patterns of contact in the presence of moral prejudice. Moral prejudice surrounds assumptions about the morality of targeted outgroups. It could be directed at one's own group, those of different religious affiliations, individuals in certain professions, and those of a particular gender. Our limited interviews do not provide details on the last two types of prejudice. However, the findings capture inconsistent effects of intergroup contact on both internalised prejudice and religious prejudice. We observe a common struggle to handle identity threats that Syrians may encounter in their interactions with other Syrians in Japan. Particularly when Syrian children engage in contact, identity threats intensify, creating a clash between cultural interest and optimal intergroup contact. Integration into the host Japanese society may facilitate intergroup contact and reconcile the mentioned clash.

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Based on the reported outcomes of intergroup contact in Japan, we present common prejudices among Syrians in two categories: mutable prejudices and entrenched prejudices.

5.1. Mutable prejudices

Intergroup contact theory posits that encountering people from different social groups reduces prejudices under certain conditions. Hundreds of studies investigate contact effect in varying social contexts, paving the way for an avalanche of constructive criticism and the emergence of new directions in theory application. Prejudice reduction as an optimal effect of intergroup contact has four stages: "*learning about the outgroup, changing behaviour, generating affective ties, and ingroup reappraisal*" (Pettigrew 1998, p. 70).

Japan provides a secure environment for learning about the outgroup. Its legal framework provides equal protection to interactants, and its social norms uphold mutual respect and reinforce social harmony. These features of social climate are particularly significant when observing political stance prejudice among Syrian migrants. Evidence suggests that the lack of opportunity to learn about the outgroup plays a key role in this form of prejudice. It also highlights the role of societal norms and practical considerations in the reported change of behaviour, for instance, avoiding contentious discussions and cooperating in the workplace. The analysis of political stance prejudice confirms two stages of prejudice reduction in Japan towards an optimal effect of intergroup contact.

Disparities-related prejudice appears to be less influenced by the opportunity to learn about the outgroup and more sensitive to the structural context. This may partially explain why this form of prejudice has significantly declined in Japan's socioeconomic climate. Biases tied to regional affiliations are evident across all narratives. However, placing exclusionary emphasis on when someone is considered genuinely affiliated with a region is generally frowned upon. Reactions to such overemphasis both suggest a reduction in prejudice, and highlight a key condition for effective intergroup contact: prejudice should not be ingrained in the personalities of interactants, which was referred to in previous research. We add to the latter condition in a new place for intergroup contact that prejudice should not be a defence mechanism to the new realities of displacement.

Our findings on mutable prejudices are consistent with past research on the group threat theory (Quillian, 1995). According to this theory, threats to a dominant group's economic and demographic privileges lead to prejudice against the threatening minority. Thus, "*when economic circumstances improve, the corresponding reduction in perceived competition decreases group feelings of threat*" (p. 590). However, it should be noted that the latter argument is built on studying two types of prejudices, anti-immigrant and racial prejudices in the European Economic Community countries, while political stance prejudice and disparities-related prejudices in the present study cover different aspects, and are not confined to the binary of dominant group versus minority.

5.2. Entrenched prejudices

Moral prejudices appear to be less influenced by Japan's socioeconomic climate and more sensitive to the dynamics of social identities compared to the previous two forms

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of prejudice. This observation echoes previous research on multiple categorisation, which confirms greater bias on the dimensions of religion, ethnicity and gender (Grigoryan et al., 2022). Therefore, biases on the mentioned dimensions are more resistant to the essential conditions for optimal contact in Japan. Learning about the outgroup and behaviour change, for instance, facilitate establishing intergroup friendship. However, the friendship is interrupted with symbolic threats to one's original identity, which dynamics align with the source model of group threat (Greenaway & Cruwys, 2019). The latter conceptualises the source of threats to one's group in two categories: internal and external threats. People's reactions to the perceived threat, whether physical or symbolic, differ according to the source. While external threats strengthen ingroup bias and increase solidarity, internal threats have a reverse effect on group cohesion. When someone threatens a certain interest of their own group, ingroup fellows either underestimate the threat, ostracise the deviant, or psychologically withdraw from this group when it is impossible to contain the situation. Applying a multiple group memberships framework, we link our findings on the effect of contact on moral prejudice to three reactions to internal threats captured within the Syrian community. They are: downplaying threats to one's group, reverting to one's subgroup, and psychological withdrawal associated with attitudes of internalised prejudice.

Our qualitative data captures a reactive significance of group memberships and a fluctuating visibility of cultural differences during intergroup contact experiences in the new setting. For instance, the presence of children in contact amplifies the significance of subgroup membership. Also, integration into the host society can make cultural differences among Syrians less visible, and cross-religion friendships are more likely. Such practical examples underscore that the significance of group membership is more responsive to the context of contact than group typicality. Therefore, the reduction of entrenched prejudices is contingent upon context-specific contact conditions.

Based on our analysis, we contend that the dimension of prejudice interplays with contact conditions. The optimal contact conditions provided by Japan proved more effective in reducing mutable prejudices exchanged among Syrian subgroups. Entrenched prejudices, on the other hand, decrease only when contact does not clash with the value system of interactants.

This research is designed to explore situational aspects of intergroup contact at the micro, individual level. Therefore, we depend on the reported evaluation of intergroup perceptions after experiencing spontaneous interpersonal contact with Syrian outgroups. In this sense, our study by no means reveals generalisable effects. Yet, our qualitative analysis is important to understand how prejudice unfolds in a new context of contrasting contact conditions. Given the severe fragmentation of Syrian society, which is associated with many prejudices on multiple dimensions, qualitative studies on intergroup contact theory are needed. They familiarise Syrian society with this kind of research, encouraging larger participation in future large-scale research. Similar qualitative studies in different contexts can help reveal the larger picture of the interplay between prejudice and the social climate of contact. Also, future statistical studies, which take into consideration multiple group memberships, can complement our endeavours to understand the effect of intergroup contact in a new place at the macro level.

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We now turn to the conclusion to summarise our findings and discussion, highlighting the need to engage more participants to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of intergroup contact dynamics among Syrians in Japan.

6. Conclusion

Japan, as a third place for interactions between Syrian subgroups, offers optimal contact conditions. These conditions appear to be effective in reducing prejudices on the political and socioeconomic dimensions. However, religious and internalised prejudices interplay differently within the optimal social climate. Religious prejudice decreases only when contact does not clash with interactants' value system, while intragroup cooperation surpasses other optimal conditions in reducing internalised prejudice. In this sense, the contact effect differs according to the type of prejudice and the immediate context of interactions, even in an overall optimal social climate for intergroup contact.

This study is one of the very few studies that have qualitatively investigated intergroup contact among migrants originally from a conflict-affected country, recognising their multiple group memberships. It contributes to the existing literature by offering new insights into the interplay between intergroup contact conditions and prejudice forms, expanding the focus of current research to understudied dimensions, including perceived political stance and internalised prejudice.

Our study has a distinctive analytical tool to explore participants' perspectives beyond the politicised narratives of prejudice and social fragmentation. The method of consensus coding between native and non-native researchers helps strike a balance between probing subjective accounts and maintaining a neutral scientific orientation. Consensus coding offers the advantage of possessing insider insight into the participants' cultures and prevents too much knowledge from interfering with the analysis. Although our sample is small, we hope that this study will familiarise the Syrian communities with our scholarly work, encouraging larger participation in the future. Statistical studies with greater research resources are recommended to test the generalisability of our findings in a broader context.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This research was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Board of Hiroshima University (HR-HM-002644/ February 18, 2025). Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with the ethical standards and guidelines on research involving humans at Hiroshima University Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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