

Article

Sabr as a Situated Religious Concept of Resilience Among Syrian Refugee Women in Turkey

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Abstract

Religion is increasingly recognized as important for coping and resilience in contexts of forced migration, yet broad categories such as “religious coping” do not fully explain how specific Islamic concepts become experientially available and action-guiding in everyday life. This article examines *sabr* among Syrian refugee women living in Turkey as a situated moral–religious concept rather than a simple equivalent of “patience.” The analysis draws on 24 semi-structured interviews conducted in Hatay, Turkey, between 2017 and 2023 and uses reflexive thematic analysis informed by research on situated abstract concepts and cultural model theory. Across the interviews, *sabr* emerged as a core Islamic idiom through which women made hardship intelligible and organized accounts of endurance, restraint, dignity, and action under prolonged uncertainty. *Sabr* was described as learned through religious practice and prior adversity, enacted through emotional, bodily, and verbal restraint, sustained through Qur’anic language and exemplary narratives, and closely linked to motherhood, social responsibility, trust in God, and expectations of eventual relief or divine reward. Rather than presenting *sabr* as a discrete coping strategy or psychological mechanism, the findings show how it organized women’s accounts of endurance, responsibility, and action within a broader religious–moral framework. An emic understanding of resilience among Muslim refugees therefore requires attention to lived concepts through which suffering becomes meaningful, morally framed, and practically bearable.

Keywords: *sabr*; Syrian refugee women; resilience; religious coping; Islamic psychology; cultural models; situated concepts; Turkey

1. Introduction

For many refugees, religious beliefs, practices, and narratives do more than provide comfort; they help organize suffering, sustain hope, regulate conduct, and preserve a sense of self amid radically changed life conditions (Shaw et al. 2019; Hawkes et al. 2020; Oviedo et al. 2022). Understanding how Islamic concepts shape resilience among Muslim refugees is thus both a theoretical and practical concern in the psychology of health, migration, and religion.

This perspective is supported by multiple fields of scholarship. In the psychology of religion, Pargament’s work remains foundational, demonstrating that religion is not merely a set of beliefs but a framework influencing appraisal, goals, perceived control, and coping under stress (Pargament 1997, 2012; Pargament et al. 2000). Resilience research has also shifted from viewing resilience as an individual trait toward emphasizing relational, ecological, collective, and culturally shaped modes of adaptation, especially in



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forced migration contexts (Kuo 2011, 2013; Ungar 2008, 2011). Qualitative studies of Syrian refugees highlight the importance of family, faith, cultural continuity, and trust in God as key supports amid displacement and uncertainty (Atari-Khan et al. 2021; Fadhli et al. 2022; Alachkar 2023).

However, broad categories like “religious coping,” “meaning-making,” or “resilience” do not fully capture how specific religious concepts become experientially real, morally authoritative, and action-guiding in daily life. Research in cultural psychology, cultural psychiatry, and anthropology shows that suffering is interpreted through culturally specific notions of self, moral worlds, and local narratives of endurance (Kirmayer 2007; Panter-Brick and Eggerman 2012; Shweder 1991). This is especially relevant in studying Muslim populations, where Islamic concepts such as *sabr*, *tawakkul* (trust in God; reliance on God), *shukr* (gratitude; thankfulness), and *ridā* (contentment, acceptance, satisfaction with God’s decree) do not neatly align with established psychological categories. Interpreting Muslim experiences solely through externally derived vocabularies risks misrepresenting or diminishing understanding of locally rooted ways of enduring suffering, making it meaningful, and acting within it. These concepts must be studied as lived categories embedded in religious language, embodied practice, relational obligations, and moral understandings of hardship (Achour et al. 2016; Hamdy 2009). Recent work in Islamic psychology supports this view, advocating approaches grounded in Islamic intellectual and moral traditions rather than imposed psychological terms alone (Rothman and Coyle 2018; Rothman 2022). From this standpoint, the key question is not simply whether religion supports coping or resilience, but how particular Islamic concepts organize experience, moral conduct, and action in specific social contexts.

To address this gap, the present article focuses on *sabr*, a concept highly salient in qualitative interviews with Syrian refugee women living in Turkey. Although often translated as “patience,” our participants’ accounts suggest a much richer, more textured meaning. In their narratives, *sabr* involved not only enduring suffering, but also emotional and verbal restraint, trust in God, maintaining dignity, continuing family roles, and persevering through hardship. Rather than treating *sabr* as a simple synonym for patience or reducing it to a single coping strategy, this article approaches it as a situated moral–religious concept through which suffering is interpreted, endured, and morally navigated in everyday life.

Although *sabr* is commonly translated as “patience,” its religious and everyday meanings are broader, encompassing forbearance, endurance, perseverance, self-control, and composed conduct toward others. Philological analyses of the Arabic root *ṣ-b-r* point to meanings of binding, restraining, and holding back (Wehr 1974), suggesting that *sabr* is not simply passive endurance, but an active discipline of the self. Classical Islamic thought similarly presents *sabr* not as the absence of emotion, but as the regulation of impulse, speech, and action. In the Qur’anic framework, *sabr* is a central virtue of the believer, repeatedly associated with divine support and reward, including the promise that those who are patient will be rewarded “without measure” (Qur’an 39:10). Well-known hadith (prophetic tradition; report of the Prophet Muhammad’s words or actions) also locates true patience at “the first stroke of calamity” (al-Bukhārī 1979), emphasizing real-time self-regulation precisely at the moment when distress, anger, or despair could escalate into action. This regulatory function is also carried by religious language and everyday supplications, such as *yā ṣabr* (“O patience!”) or *Allāh ya ṭīnā ṣabr* (“May God give us patience”), which may work as condensed instructions for self-restraint and emotional distancing in moments of sudden tension.

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s influential typology distinguishes three forms of *sabr*: perseverance in fulfilling religious obligations (*ṣabr ‘alā al-ṭā’a*), restraint from what is forbidden (*ṣabr ‘an al-ma’ṣiya*), and steadfastness in suffering and adversity (*ṣabr ‘alā al-balā*)

(al-Jawziyyah 1997; el-Aswad 2014; Rothman 2022). This typology shows that *sabr* is not only a response to crisis, but also a capacity cultivated through everyday religious practice before crisis occurs. Authors writing on *sabr* in Sunni Muslim worldviews emphasize this active dimension: patience requires effort and activity, and is not understood as an innate character trait, but as a skill that can and should be practised and strengthened; when a person strives to be patient, God supports that effort (el-Aswad 2014). Thus, *sabr* refers to an engaged moral and religious practice through which the person continues to act, restrain destructive impulses, and remain oriented toward God despite hardship (el-Aswad 2014; Rothman 2022).

For this reason, *sabr* also has a central meaning-making function. In an Islamic framework, suffering is not interpreted merely as a meaningless disruption of the normal course of life but may be understood as a trial (*balāʾ*), a process of moral and spiritual formation, and an occasion for maintaining one's relationship with God (Rothman 2022). In Islamic psychology, however, *sabr* does not function in isolation. It is closely connected with other religious attitudes, including acceptance of the reality of the trial, expressed through *riḍā*; trust in God, or *tawakkul*; gratitude for divine blessings even in times of calamity, or *shukr*; and the continuation of moral action despite suffering (Rothman 2022). Meaning is therefore not an additional layer added to patience, but one of its conditions: without acceptance, trust, and moral orientation, *sabr* risks being reduced to mere endurance.

While this theological and moral background clarifies the religious significance of *sabr*, it does not yet explain how the concept becomes available, meaningful, and action-guiding in the everyday lives of Syrian refugee women. To understand *sabr* as a lived concept rather than only as a doctrinal virtue, we need a theoretical approach that explains how abstract religious meanings become grounded in embodied experience, social relations, language, and repeated practices. Research on embodied and grounded cognition challenges older views that abstract concepts are primarily amodal and decontextualized. Instead, these concepts are shaped by recurring bodily, emotional, social, and linguistic experiences (Barsalou 2008; Barsalou and Wiemer-Hastings 2005; Harpaintner et al. 2018; Kiefer and Harpaintner 2020; Rieger and Bart 2025). Concepts gain meaning through repeated situations integrating bodily states, emotions, language, relationships, and actions.

This perspective is valuable for analyzing Islamic theological and moral concepts because it treats them not as disembodied beliefs or mere Western psychological equivalents, but as meanings enacted through concrete bodily, relational, and moral situations. The concept of embodied religiosity also resonates with broader critiques of the Protestant and modern Western bias that has shaped much scholarship on religion. As scholars such as Saroglou have argued, dominant academic definitions often privilege belief, doctrine, and internal conviction while marginalizing ritual, bodily practice, and material culture. Consequently, conventional measures of religiosity frequently overlook the embodied dimensions through which religion becomes meaningful in everyday life. This concern also resonates with lived religion approaches, which shift attention from formal doctrine or institutional belonging to how religion is practiced, experienced, narrated, and embodied in ordinary life. Attention to lived and embodied religion therefore enables a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals negotiate religious identities, experience the sacred, and integrate spiritual meanings into the practical realities of contemporary existence (Saroglou 2020; Ammerman 2007).

In Islamic practice, bodily discipline, spiritual orientation, affect, and ethical conduct are closely intertwined. For our participants, *sabr* is not merely an abstract theological term; it is a concept shaped by recurring experiences of hunger, fear, waiting, grief, prayer, bodily restraint, and childrearing.

At the same time, embodied experience alone does not explain how a concept becomes socially recognized, morally binding, and normatively organized. Therefore, this study also draws on cultural model theory. As [Bennardo \(2018\)](#) explains, cultural model theory views culture as residing in individuals' minds, while emphasizing social and linguistic processes through which knowledge is learned, transmitted, and shared. Cultural models consist of related conceptual units, often implicit, acquired through imitation and explicit teaching, and directive of what is normal, appropriate, or expected conduct within a community.

This framework is especially useful for analyzing *sabr*. Participants did not present *sabr* as an isolated belief or private feeling, but as a socially available and morally authoritative category embedded in a broader model of hardship and endurance. It connected hardship, divine trial, self-restraint, maternal responsibility, dignity, social harmony, and eventual relief or reward. Cultural model theory thus clarifies why *sabr* is multidimensional yet analytically coherent: its aspects are relationally organized elements within a shared moral–religious model guiding interpretation, conduct, and action under limited control.

Against this backdrop, the article examines how *sabr* is invoked, narrated, and embodied by Syrian Muslim refugee women in Turkey. Instead of asking what *sabr* ought to mean doctrinally, the analysis traces how it functions across participants' accounts as a situated moral–religious concept. In doing so, the article addresses a broader challenge in cultural psychology: analyzing concepts across moral worlds without reducing them to familiar psychological constructs ([Shweder 1991](#); [Shweder et al. 1997](#)). The analysis maintains *sabr*'s emic grounding while distinguishing its analytic levels—as a theological and moral virtue, as part of a shared model of hardship and endurance, and as a set of concrete practices and narratives through which women organize endurance, restraint, caregiving, perseverance, and trust in God.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Analytic Orientation

This article draws on qualitative interview material collected as part of a broader study on resilience among Syrian refugee women living in Turkey. Whereas the larger project examined a wide range of difficulties, resources, and adaptive processes, the present article adopts a more focused analytic strategy by concentrating specifically on how participants understood, invoked, described, and narrated practices associated with *sabr*. *Sabr* was selected for focused analysis because it emerged as one of the most salient and recurrent religious concepts in the interview material. The aim was therefore not to identify all coping strategies mentioned by participants, but to examine how *sabr* operated as a lived religious category within everyday refugee experience.

The analysis was informed by a social constructionist epistemology in qualitative research ([Charmaz 2006](#)) and conducted using reflexive thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021](#)). From this perspective, meanings are not treated as fixed entities waiting to be extracted from the data; rather, they are articulated in narrative, shaped in the interview encounter, and subsequently interpreted through the analytic process. The aim of the present analysis was not to establish a single definitive meaning of *sabr*, but to develop a transparent and theoretically informed interpretation of how participants used this concept to make sense of hardship, endurance, self-restraint, family responsibility, trust in God, and morally appropriate conduct under conditions of displacement. Reflexive thematic analysis was particularly suited to this aim because it allowed us to develop an interpretation grounded in participants' own language, narratives, and situated accounts, rather than treating *sabr* as a predefined psychological category such as coping, emotion regulation, or resilience.

2.2. Field Site and Participants

The study is based on 24 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted between 2017 and 2023 in Hatay, a Turkish border province neighboring Syria. Most participants were living in urban settings in Antakya and İskenderun rather than in refugee camps. Hatay constituted a particularly important field site because of its geographical proximity to Syria, its long-standing historical and linguistic ties to northern Syrian regions, and its significance as a major area of Syrian settlement following forced displacement.

Participants were recruited purposively through trusted local contacts and social networks. The main inclusion criteria were that participants were Syrian, Muslim, women, living in Turkey under conditions of displacement, and willing to speak openly about their everyday lives and difficulties. The sample included women of different ages, educational backgrounds, family situations, and work histories, most of whom came from Aleppo, Idlib, Saraqib, Hama, or nearby regions in northern Syria.

2.3. Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in Syrian Arabic and audio-recorded with verbal informed consent. Most took place in participants' homes or in other trusted settings, including schools and NGO spaces. The interview format was semi-structured and flexible. Participants were invited to speak about their lives in Turkey, the main difficulties they faced, what helped them endure these difficulties, and whether religion, values, rituals, or cultural practices played a role in this process.

Because the broader project focused on resilience more generally, the interview guide did not center exclusively on *sabr*. Nevertheless, *sabr* emerged repeatedly and spontaneously in participants' accounts, especially in response to questions about how they dealt with ongoing hardship, what helped them continue, and which religious or cultural resources were meaningful in daily life. In many interviews, follow-up prompts were used to clarify what participants meant by *sabr*, how they practiced it, and why they considered it important.

All interviews were transcribed from Syrian Arabic. The analysis presented here is based on those transcripts, with attention to both recurring expressions and longer narrative passages in which *sabr* was explicitly discussed or implicitly enacted. All quotations in this article are presented in English translation.

2.4. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The production and interpretation of these data were shaped by the researchers' linguistic, social, and disciplinary positioning. The interviews were conducted by a female researcher (MK, the first author), who speaks Arabic, had previously lived in Syria, and was familiar with Syrian dialect, everyday social life, and religious-cultural vocabulary. This facilitated rapport and access, particularly in domestic settings where participants discussed intimate family matters, suffering, and religiously inflected forms of endurance that might have remained less accessible in a more formal interview context.

The second author (HGM) contributed 27 years of field experience working with and for refugees across multiple countries in Europe and Africa. Her work is grounded in cultural psychology, with particular expertise in acculturation stress and in the processes shaping relations between refugees and host societies. All research was conducted from an emic perspective.

At the same time, such familiarity was not treated as neutral transparency, but as part of the interpretive process. The analysis was informed by the authors' background in cultural psychology and their interest in socially embedded resilience and Islamic psychology. This shaped both the sensitivity to concepts such as *sabr*, *tawakkul*, and *shukr* and the deci-

sion to treat them not merely as local labels for universal psychological constructs, but as meaningful categories through which participants themselves interpreted experience.

2.5. Analytical Procedure

The material was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), but in a focused and theoretically informed manner. The first step consisted of repeated reading of the interview transcripts to identify passages in which participants explicitly mentioned *sabr*, described states or practices associated with it, or narrated situations in which *sabr* was enacted, socially expected, or morally evaluated.

These passages were then coded interpretively rather than purely descriptively. Coding focused on recurrent understandings of *sabr* as endurance, emotional restraint, control of complaint, trust in God, moral strength, persistence under hardship, and proper conduct in relation to others. Attention was also given to the contexts in which *sabr* became meaningful, including poverty, loss, discrimination, conflict, childrearing, humiliation, and uncertainty.

The analysis was theoretically guided rather than fully inductive. It remained grounded in participants' language and narrative examples, but it was oriented by the article's central question: how do Syrian Muslim refugee women understand *sabr* as a resource within resilience? More specifically, the analysis proceeded on two complementary levels. At one level, informed by research on situated conceptualization, it examined how participants' accounts suggested that *sabr* was grounded in recurrent experiential contexts, including bodily states, affect, religious language, social relations, and ritual practice. At another level, informed by cultural model theory, it examined how *sabr* appeared in the interviews as part of a broader religiously grounded framework through which hardship, suffering, endurance, and proper conduct were interpreted in normatively meaningful ways.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study followed standard ethical procedures for qualitative interviewing with potentially vulnerable populations. Participants gave verbally informed consent to participation and audio-recording, and all identifying details were removed during transcription. Pseudonyms were used throughout. Because the interviews touched on potentially painful experiences, particular care was taken not to probe directly into wartime trauma unless participants themselves chose to introduce such topics. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or end the interview at any time. Special attention was paid to maintaining a respectful, participant-led pace of conversation and minimizing the risk of retraumatization.

3. Results

Across the interviews, *sabr* emerged not as a narrow equivalent of "patience," but as a broader religious category through which participants interpreted hardship, endurance, emotional restraint, trust in God, and the continuation of everyday life under prolonged uncertainty. More specifically, the material presents *sabr* as a core Islamic idiom of hardship and endurance; as something learned through religious obligations, prior adversity, and socialization; as a situational script of emotional, bodily, and verbal self-restraint; as a relational and maternal practice linked to dignity and social harmony; as something sustained through religious language and exemplary narratives; as a form of active perseverance rather than passive resignation; and as a way of enduring suffering as part of God's trial.

3.1. *Sabr as a Core Islamic Idiom of Hardship and Endurance*

A first striking pattern in the interviews is that *sabr* appears as one of the most central and self-evident religious categories through which women speak about suffering. In

several interviews, religion itself was directly equated with patience. A nineteen-year-old participant from Hama, working in vegetable harvesting near İskenderun, explained:

“Islam is patience. Our religion is patience. First of all—patience. Now we are being patient. Of course, if God did not give us patience, we would not be able to live. For example, my two brothers died. And my uncle, my cousin. And her [pointing to her friend] brother has been in Assad’s prison for three years and is being tortured. These are the kinds of things that, if God did not give us patience, we would not be able to go on living. This is what our religion wants; Islam is patience. We are supposed to be patient, and then we will receive a reward for patience. God will surely bring us relief from suffering in the end—surely—but we do not know how long it will take.” [19, single, none]¹

This kind of statement suggests that for some participants *sabr* was not one religious value among others, but something close to the core of religion itself. Participants also linked *sabr* to the idea that hardship is part of life and should be expected. In this sense, patience was described not as something discovered only after displacement, but as a pre-existing religious resource that became especially important in exile.

3.2. Learning Patient Endurance Through Religious Practice and Prior Hardship

A second recurring theme is that *sabr* was described as something learned over time through religious practice and prior hardship. Several participants suggested that Islam prepares believers for difficulty through its obligations, especially prayer, fasting, and Qur’anic recitation. In this sense, patience was not presented as a spontaneous reaction to suffering, but as something cultivated before crisis.

One participant explained that the hunger she experienced during several months in war-torn Aleppo was easier to bear because she had fasted in Ramadan since childhood. Another older woman described arriving in Turkey during Ramadan and fasting through the first month of exile despite having almost no food for *iftār* (breaking the fast; evening meal after fasting in Ramadan):

“We came during Ramadan and we had no food, and we fasted, just as we normally fast in Ramadan, and we were patient, and we had no food at all, only bulgur, and we did not even have salad or anything with it. And we fasted and we said alhamdulillah.” [50, married, 2]

This pattern is analytically important because it shows that *sabr* was not produced only after displacement. Participants drew on embodied and moral disciplines that had been cultivated before exile, especially through fasting, prayer, Qur’anic recitation, and earlier experiences of hardship. *Sabr* therefore appears not as a spontaneous individual trait, but as a culturally and religiously prepared repertoire of endurance. At the same time, this also means that women entered displacement already shaped by moral expectations that suffering should be borne with patience, restraint, and trust in God. *Sabr* is thus both a resource and a learned expectation.

3.3. Restraining Speech, Anger, and Despair in Low-Control Situations

Another clear pattern in the material is that *sabr* functions as a practical script for how one should act in difficult situations.

Participants repeatedly described *sabr* as requiring the restraint of anger, despair, and impulsive reactions. The underlying logic was often pragmatic: intense emotion does not change the situation, whereas controlling one’s reaction makes it possible to endure it.

One participant expressed this very clearly while speaking about hunger in Syria:

“Even in Syria, before I moved with my mother to Turkey, we also went through many hard days, so we got used to it. When we were hungry in Syria, we tried to stay calm; we did not talk about it. It was simply—there is no food, and that is it, what can you do?”
[21, single, none]

In the interviews, this self-restraint appears at several levels. First, women described bodily endurance under conditions of deprivation and labor. One participant said:

“The work is very tiring. We work in the fields to help the men. For example, now we are fasting and working in the full sun [the interview was conducted during Ramadan]. But if we do not work, we will not survive.” [43, married, 2]

Under these circumstances, patience was also linked to verbal conduct: not shouting, not lamenting, not accusing, and not speaking in ways that would intensify fear or helplessness.

Women also linked patience to proper social conduct: remaining calm, polite, and self-controlled in difficult interactions, and not escalating conflict even when treated unfairly.

“For example, I had a problem here with my neighbor, who kept coming and shouting that the children should not make noise, that Syrians make noise ... but I do not say that she is bad or anything. Even if I am right and she is wrong, I do not say anything. God will judge us.” [30, married, 4]

The restraint described in these accounts should not be read simply as emotional suppression or passive endurance. The examples above show that restraint was often narrated as situationally rational conduct under conditions where direct reaction could not easily change the situation and might intensify harm. Hunger and waiting for food supplies required endurance because no immediate action was available; field labor during Ramadan was endured because work was necessary for survival; and conflict with a neighbor was met with silence and trust in God in order to avoid escalation and preserve dignity. In such situations, *sabr* functioned as a form of agency within constraint rather than as the absence of agency. It enabled women to regulate conduct, protect children, sustain family life, and continue acting where the range of possible action was narrow.

3.4. Motherhood and the Gendered Work of Patient Endurance

At the relational level, *sabr* appears as a way of preserving relationships, maintaining dignity, and continuing everyday life under pressure.

Participants repeatedly described patience as necessary for protecting children from fear, instability, and emotional overload:

“I am a very strong woman. I am alone with my four children. I have to be strong for them because they take their strength from me. If I am weak, my children are also weak.”
[31, divorced, 4]

Another example of patient, step-by-step rebuilding of ordinary life appeared in the account of a woman who said:

“My daughter’s birthday is in a few weeks, so starting from now, I try to buy one ingredient for her birthday cake each week.” [30, married, 3]

In these narratives, *sabr* appears as the quiet discipline of sustaining family life under severe limitation. In this sense, *sabr* was tied not only to endurance, but also to care, responsibility, and the moral work of holding the family together under pressure.

The maternal dimension of *sabr* therefore shows both agency and burden. On the one hand, participants presented patient endurance as part of the moral work of protecting children, sustaining family life, and preserving ordinary continuity under severe constraint. On the other hand, these narratives also show how displacement transfers much

of the emotional labor of survival onto mothers. Women were expected to remain calm, strong, kind, and responsible even when they themselves were exhausted, isolated, or economically insecure. *Sabr* in this context is therefore not only an inner virtue, but also a gendered form of work.

3.5. Qur'anic Language and Exemplary Narratives as Repertoires of Endurance

Another important theme is that *sabr* appears in the interviews as something sustained and kept available through language training. In this sense, *sabr* was not only a moral ideal, but also something activated through everyday speech.

Participants referred to expressions such as *inna lillāhi wa inna ilayhi rāji'ūn* ("Indeed, we belong to God, and indeed, to Him we return"), *ya sabr* ("O patience!"), and *Allāh ya 'īnā ṣabr* ("May God give us patience"). Mothers in particular were described as saying such phrases in difficult situations, including in moments of frustration with children, as a reminder to remain calm and kind. Participants frequently referred to the saying *al-sabr miftāḥ al-faraj* ("Patience is the key to relief"), sometimes describing it as rooted in hadith. The image of patience as a "key" is especially meaningful here: *sabr* is presented as that which unlocks *faraj*—relief after distress, release after tightness, remedy, and even joy after sadness. In this formulation, patience is not merely passive waiting, but a valued mode of enduring suffering while remaining oriented toward the possibility of eventual opening and resolution.

The Qur'an itself appeared in the interviews as a direct source of patience and inner calm. One participant explained:

"Reading the Qur'an helps me. When I read the Qur'an, it calms me inwardly, because everything is in the Qur'an—patience, morality ... there is, for example, this verse:

And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient (Q 2:155).

just like what happened to us in Syria. What is mentioned in the Qur'an happened to us; The Qur'an gives me inner strength, it gives me patience. It calms me inside, I feel peaceful. For example, when I get upset, I cry ... but when I open Sūrat al-Baqara, I calm down ... I rest as if someone had worked very, very hard and then laid their head on a pillow. Exactly like that. (...) Everything is in the Qur'an: patience, morality (akhlaq). I feel that I can bear many stresses. More and more problems come to me ... but I can manage all of them inwardly (...) above all, it is patience that helps." [30, married, 4]

Participants also invoked religious narratives about figures who embodied *sabr*. These included the Prophet Muhammad in the context of the *hijra*, his migration from Mecca to Medina; Pharaoh's wife, Āsiya and Maryam, the mother of Jesus. These figures appeared as models of steadfastness, rewarded suffering, and faith under trial. These religious phrases and narratives functioned as more than verbal expressions of belief. They provided a portable moral repertoire through which participants could recognize suffering, name an appropriate response, and reorient themselves toward patience, trust, and eventual relief. Qur'anic language made *sabr* experientially available in moments of fear, grief, or agitation by connecting present hardship to a wider narrative world of trial, endurance, and divine mercy. At the same time, such repertoires may also normalize endurance when structural conditions remain unchanged. Their significance therefore lies not only in consolation, but in the way they organize both possibility and limitation.

3.6. Patient Perseverance, Divine Trust, and Action Within Constraint

A final theme strongly present in the data is that *sabr* was not understood as passive resignation. Participants repeatedly distinguished between true patience and mere waiting. One woman explained that there are "two kinds of patience." Good patience means

perseverance directed toward a goal—studying, working, learning, rebuilding one’s life step by step. Bad patience means sitting still and expecting God to do everything without effort. As she put it:

“Patience is good. Patience means persevering until you reach the goal—that is true patience. I have to work on myself, understand where I am making mistakes, and correct them.” [29, single, none]

By contrast, she continues:

“But the other kind—‘I will just sit and God will take care of everything for me’—is not a healthy approach.”

She added that enduring a situation that can be changed with one’s effort is not *sabr*.

This distinction is an important finding in the material. It shows that in participants’ own accounts, patience is not morally valuable regardless of context. Rather, *sabr* is linked to persevering action within the limits of what is possible. It means enduring what cannot be changed while still acting in the areas where action remains possible. Women associated this kind of patience with study, work, learning new skills, rebuilding a business, learning the language, and reconstructing life from the beginning.

A striking example of this appears in one participant’s account of exile and grief:

“When I first came from Syria I was crying and crying endlessly... but then I suddenly realized why did I come to this country?—Because God wants to see my patience. It is said: if our Lord loves us, he tests us to see our patience. He took my children and my mother away from me because he wanted to see my patience. So, then I thought: why am I crying? I shouldn’t cry—I should say alhamdulillah, I should rely on God. And so I organized Quranic meetings, and dhikr (the remembrance of God through repeated devotional phrases—MK), and frankly, I forgot everything that happened in Syria”. [55, married, 5]

This account suggests that *sabr* was not narrated simply as emotional suppression, but as a reorientation toward meaningful action under conditions of loss.

A further dimension of *sabr* in the interviews was its connection to a broader religious understanding of suffering as part of God’s plan. In the participants’ accounts, patience was rarely described as a purely individual psychological resource. Rather, it was embedded in a theological and moral framework in which major life events—suffering, separation, death, poverty, and forced migration—were understood as depending ultimately on God’s will. In this framework, *sabr* was possible because hardship itself was not seen as random or meaningless, but as part of a divinely ordered reality that demanded trust, endurance, and moral steadfastness.

These narratives suggest that *sabr* did not function in isolation. It was closely linked to *tawakkul* (trust in divine plan), to acceptance of what had happened, thankfulness and to the understanding that hardship forms part of a meaningful divine order.

4. Discussion

The findings show that *sabr* is best understood not as a simple equivalent of “patience” or merely as a strategy of religious coping, but as a situated moral–religious concept through which Syrian Muslim refugee women made hardship intelligible and organized accounts of endurance, restraint, dignity, and action under prolonged uncertainty. This reading is consistent with Aqtam’s recent conceptualization of *sabr* as a multidimensional Islamic framework for Muslims facing collective trauma. Aqtam distinguishes between *sabr al-ibādah*, or endurance in devotion, *sabr ‘an al-ma‘ṣiyah*, or restraint from prohibited responses, and *sabr ‘alā al-muṣibah*, or endurance through affliction (Aqtam 2026). The present findings support this conceptual discussion empirically by showing how these

dimensions become embedded in everyday refugee life, especially through religious practice, emotional and verbal restraint, maternal responsibility, dignity, Qur'anic language, and action under conditions of limited control.

These findings empirically extend the conceptual understanding of *sabr* outlined above. Rather than appearing in the interviews as a fixed doctrinal definition, *sabr* was narrated through recurrent experiential constellations that gave it practical and moral meaning: hunger, fatigue, fear, grief, waiting, bodily restraint, controlled speech, Qur'anic recitation, supplication, motherhood, social responsibility, and trust in God. This finding is consistent with cultural model theory, insofar as it shows how culturally shared religious concepts are not merely abstract ideas, but interpretive and practical schemas through which people make sense of experience, regulate conduct, and orient action within particular social and moral worlds.

In the interviews *sabr* was narrated through recurrent experiential constellations that gave it practical and moral meaning. These included bodily states such as hunger, fatigue, and physical strain; affective and interoceptive states such as fear, grief, agitation, and calming; religious language such as supplications, Qur'anic verses, and invocations of patience; social and relational contexts structured by motherhood, caregiving, and conflict; ritual practices such as fasting, prayer, and Qur'anic recitation; and normatively charged action scripts involving restraint, non-escalation, endurance, and perseverance. In this respect, the findings are also consistent with a situated conceptualization account of abstract concepts, according to which abstract meanings are grounded in recurrent multimodal and context-sensitive patterns of experience rather than in disembodied definitions alone (Barsalou 2008; Barsalou and Wiemer-Hastings 2005; Harpaintner et al. 2018; Kiefer and Harpaintner 2020; Rieger and Bart 2025).

Cultural model theory helps clarify the apparent multiplicity of *sabr* without turning it into an all-purpose explanatory category. As outlined in the Introduction, cultural models explain how related concepts, values, expected responses, and normative assumptions become organized into shared and directive models of conduct (Bennardo 2018). The findings do not suggest that *sabr* independently performs a series of unrelated functions. Rather, they show that *sabr* operates within a relational moral–religious model in which hardship, divine trial, restraint, motherhood, dignity, and relief are linked together. What might appear as conceptual overextension from the outside is, from within the participants' moral world, a structured set of relations between suffering, proper conduct, divine trust, and social responsibility.

Islamic psychology and Asad's account of embodied moral formation further help interpret why participants did not describe *sabr* merely as a response to distress. Islamic psychology has argued that Muslim psychological life should be understood through categories internal to the Islamic tradition, where the self, moral accountability, spiritual orientation, and psychological well-being are closely connected (Rothman and Coyle 2018; Rothman 2022). Asad's account of *dīn* ("religion," "faith," or more broadly, a way of life oriented toward God) and embodied discipline similarly shows that religious virtues are not only beliefs, but cultivated dispositions formed through practice, repetition, and self-command (Asad 1993). From this perspective, *sabr* was also a way of forming the self: learning to restrain speech, control anger, endure bodily discomfort, remain faithful, and act properly toward others. This does not make *sabr* less psychological. Rather, it shows that the psychological work of endurance was inseparable from moral and religious self-cultivation.

This also clarifies the role of *sabr* within the broader resilience process. The findings complicate rather than simply confirm standard resilience language. Resilience research increasingly emphasizes that resilience is not a stable individual trait, but a process shaped

by relational, cultural, ecological, and structural conditions (Ungar 2008, 2011; Masten 2014). In the present study, *sabr* did not appear as an individual capacity that allowed women to overcome adversity in any simple sense. It appeared as a culturally and religiously organized way of continuing under constraint, especially when control over external conditions was limited. *Sabr* did not remove displacement, poverty, family separation, or discrimination. Rather, it helped participants place these experiences within a moral and theological order in which suffering remained interpretable and therefore endurable. This shifts the analytic focus from resilience as individual recovery to resilience as morally directed endurance within a constrained social world.

An especially important finding is that participants themselves distinguished *sabr* from passivity. In their accounts, true patience did not mean inaction or surrender, but perseverance directed toward meaningful goals under conditions of constraint. In this respect, their narratives closely correspond with the theological understanding of *sabr* discussed in the Introduction: not as passive resignation, but as active moral effort involving self-restraint, perseverance, and continued action in response to hardship. This distinction is analytically important because it shows that *sabr* cannot be reduced to quietism or fatalistic acceptance. Rather, it involves enduring what cannot be changed while continuing to act where action remains possible. Mahmood's analysis helps clarify why this form of patience should be understood as agentic rather than passive. In *Politics of Piety*, she argues that virtues such as *sabr* are cultivated through repeated bodily and moral practices and become part of the formation of a religious subject, so that agency lies not only in resisting norms but also in actively inhabiting them (Mahmood 2005). This is close to what we have elsewhere described as everyday agency among Syrian refugee women: small, situated practices through which women sustain family life, preserve dignity, care for children, use faith-based coping, and continue acting under difficult conditions (Kanal and Rottmann 2021).

At the same time, a critical feminist reading of *sabr* must hold together two concerns: the risk of romanticizing women's endurance under conditions of structural violence, and the risk of imposing a secular-liberal model of agency that recognizes women's freedom only when it takes the form of individual self-assertion, explicit resistance, or distance from religious authority. This point resonates with recent critiques of resilience, which warn that resilience discourse may shift responsibility for survival onto individuals and communities, obscure structural inequalities, and normalize adaptation to conditions that should instead be politically or socially challenged (Mahdiani and Ungar 2021). In the present material, this ambivalence appeared in the participant's distinction between "right" and "wrong" *sabr*. "Wrong" *sabr* meant remaining passive in the face of aggression, abuse, or injustice, whereas "right" *sabr* referred to endurance oriented toward a morally meaningful aim, such as education, earning a living, caring for children, contributing to society, rebuilding life, or remaining faithful despite trials. Aqtam's recent conceptual discussion similarly distinguishes adaptive *sabr* from maladaptive uses that silence distress, discourage treatment, justify inaction in the face of injustice, or enable harm such as remaining in abusive relationships (Aqtam 2026).

Ali-Faisal's Islamic anti-patriarchal liberation psychology is especially useful here because it allows us to hold together decolonial critique and feminist critique. Ali-Faisal argues that psychology for Muslims should not simply impose Euro-American secular categories onto Muslim lives, but should privilege Muslim voices, challenge colonial and Islamophobic assumptions, and recover Islamic histories and anti-patriarchal interpretive traditions (Ali-Faisal 2020). At the same time, her framework explicitly critiques patriarchal interpretations of Islam and insists that Muslim women's and queer Muslims' voices must be included in the production of psychological knowledge. This gives us a way to

criticize patriarchal uses of *sabr* without treating Muslim women's religious commitments as passive internalization of oppression. From this perspective, *sabr* should be understood neither as an unproblematic virtue nor as mere resignation. It is better read as an ambivalent Islamic resource of agency under constraint: it may help women preserve dignity, regulate despair, protect children, continue moral action, and sustain hope under conditions of limited control, but it may also become burdensome when patriarchal expectations, economic precarity, discrimination, or displacement turn endurance into an obligation to suffer silently.

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Taken together, these findings point to the importance of an emic and culturally grounded approach to resilience among Muslim populations. For the women in this study, resilience was not defined primarily by the absence of distress or by autonomous mastery over external conditions. Rather, it was articulated through culturally and religiously available concepts that linked suffering, moral conduct, divine trust, social responsibility, and endurance over time. Studying *sabr* in this way shows that resilience among Syrian Muslim refugee women cannot be adequately understood through broad categories such as "religious coping" alone. It requires attention to the lived concepts through which adversity becomes meaningful, morally regulated, and practically bearable from within an Islamic world of meaning.

4.1. Implications for Practice and Future Research

Culturally informed approaches to interventions with refugees are more likely to foster trust, engagement, and effective service delivery (Harrell-Bond 1989, 2002). Such interventions should build upon existing resources of resilience within refugee communities, including religiously grounded concepts such as *sabr*. Rather than focusing exclusively on trauma and settlement-related difficulties, culturally and religiously relevant interventions should also seek to recognize and strengthen the interpretative, moral, and relational resources through which refugees make sense of suffering and sustain everyday life. Recognizing the role of emic religious concepts as resources for resilience may enhance psychological well-being, facilitate integration, and contribute to positive long-term settlement outcomes among refugees (Hasan et al. 2018).

Our findings therefore have implications for culturally sensitive care. If *sabr* is central to how many Muslim women interpret suffering, endurance, responsibility, and hope, then psychological care for Muslim populations cannot rely solely on externally derived categories of coping, trauma, or resilience. It requires a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of the concepts through which Muslim people themselves make sense of distress, survival, and moral action. In this sense, *sabr* may provide a central organizing concept for spiritually integrated interventions with Muslim clients in spiritual care, counseling, or psychotherapy.

One possible framework for such work is offered by Hjalmar Sundén's role theory (Sundén 1966), further elaborated by Grzymała-Moszczyńska (1979). Sundén's theory assumes that sacred texts may become internalized as interpretative frameworks through which believers understand their own experiences. For individuals familiar with the sacred text—in Sundén's original formulation, the Bible, but in the present context, the Qur'an—religious experience involves identifying oneself with figures described in scrip-

ture, a process referred to as role-taking. At the same time, believers develop expectations concerning God's actions toward human beings in analogous situations, a process described as role-adopting. Through these mechanisms, Qur'anic narratives can provide a framework within which personal suffering, endurance, and hope become intelligible.

At the same time, following Ali-Faisal's warning, Islamic psychology cannot treat "Muslims" as a homogeneous religious category or reproduce universalizing claims on the basis of a single case. Muslims are diverse and racialized populations whose experiences are shaped by gender, class, language, ethnicity, migration status, colonial histories, Islamophobia, and local forms of power. The Syrian refugee women in this study therefore offer one important situated case, not a final model of *sabr* for all Muslims.

Future work should build a broader mosaic of Muslim understandings of *sabr* across different social, linguistic, racialized, sectarian, gendered, and migration contexts. Such work should rely on decolonial and qualitative methodologies that privilege Muslim voices, attend to internal diversity, and remain alert to both the resources and the ambivalences of Islamic concepts in everyday life. Only through this kind of empirically grounded and critically reflexive approach can psychology move toward more culturally sensitive forms of knowledge and care for Muslim communities.

4.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a qualitative sample of Syrian Arabic-speaking Muslim women living in one region of Turkey, and the findings cannot be generalized to all Muslim populations. Second, the analysis centers on one especially salient concept rather than reconstructing the broader range of Islamic concepts that may shape resilience. Third, because the material is based on retrospective interview narratives, the analysis captures how *sabr* is reconstructed, interpreted, and morally framed from the participants' present perspective, rather than how it unfolded moment by moment in particular situations of adversity. Future research could compare *sabr* with related concepts such as *tawakkul*, *shukr*, or *riḍā*, examine variation across linguistic, social, and displacement contexts, and explore how religiously grounded concepts of endurance operate in other Muslim refugee settings. Even so, we believe that more systematic research using the theoretical and methodological framework proposed here can contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of religion in resilience processes among Muslim communities.

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Note

¹ The participant information includes [age, marital status, number of children].

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