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Syrian Refugees and Cultural Intimacy in Istanbul:
“I feel safe here!”

Ayhan Kaya

European University Institute
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Abstract

This paper derives from the findings of a recent qualitative and quantitative study conducted by the Support to Life Association among Syrian refugees in Istanbul to make their vulnerability assessment with a particular focus on their strong attachment to this city. The research question to be answered in this paper is to what extent Istanbul provides Syrian refugees with a space of cultural intimacy, where they feel safe and secure despite the difficulties of everyday life. The main premise of the paper is that historical, cultural and religious forms of affinity are likely to particularly attach the Sunni-Muslim-Arab-Syrians originating from Aleppo province to Istanbul. However, this sense of safety is not free from various sources of exploitation. This paper is expected to contribute to the discipline of Refugee Studies by shedding light on the historical elements and the agency that are often neglected in such analysis.

Keywords

Syrians, Refugee Studies, cultural intimacy, Turkey, Istanbul, Aleppo.

Introduction*

Having triggered the worst refugee crisis since World War II, the war in Syria has left almost 12 million people in desperate need of humanitarian aid. There are currently 7.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), while over 4 million people have taken refuge in Syria's immediate neighbourhood: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq (UNHCR, 2015). Among these countries, due to its open border policy, Turkey has received the largest number of Syrian refugees, who mostly originate from the Aleppo region in northern Syria. It is estimated that there are around 3 million Syrian refugees residing in Turkey, and around 500 thousand of them are settled in Istanbul. Turkey has a lot of challenges ahead, not only with regard to the integration of refugees but also to the re-enactment of democracy in the aftermath of the failed coup of 15 July 2016. Societal and political polarization of the country has become very evident since the #occupygezi movement of June 2013, and the refugees are also becoming more and more exposed to such divides. There is a growing popular resentment against the Syrian refugees, which has become even more detectable after the Turkish government explicitly announced in the summer of 2016 that a number of Syrian refugees will be granted Turkish citizenship. The level of popular resentment increases even more in the Southeast Anatolia among the Kurdish and Alevi origin local populations due to the rumours that the government is becoming more likely to demographically instrumentalize Sunni-Muslim-Arabs to counter balance the ethno-nationalist and centrifugal claims of the Kurds.

Apparently, the task of the neighbouring states including Turkey is a difficult one. But, the task of the European Union member states is not easy either. Refugee crisis is reinforcing the growth of the populist movements in the EU -a development which was already triggered by the financial crisis and neo-liberal forms of governmentality. So far, the EU has been relying on the Turkey-EU refugee deal signed on 18 March 2016. It seems that the deal has so far been successful in bringing down the number of refugees trying to go to the EU countries as well as the number of border deaths. Thomas Spijkerboer (2016) has even found that the deal has also been instrumental in breaking the business model of smugglers. The message of the deal to refugees is that *"getting on a boat in Turkey, and endangering lives in the process, is not worth the risk given that there is a legal and safe pathway through resettlement"* (Spijkerboer, 2016; Collett, 2016). According to the March 18 agreement between Turkey and the EU, irregular migrants who arrived in the Greek islands from Turkey after 20 March 2016 would be sent back to Turkey. In accordance with the articles of the Agreement, the EU was to resettle one Syrian refugee from Turkey to the bloc for each Syrian that Greece returns back to Turkey. In return, Turkey is to receive up to 6 billion euros, visa-free travel and fast track negotiations on EU accession as a result of the refugee agreement with the EU.¹

* I am grateful to the Syrian refugees who generously shared their perspectives, stories and first-hand experiences with us during the field research. I am very thankful to the members of the research team at the Support to Life Association in Istanbul, and particularly to Aysu Kırac, Sema Genel, Hanzade Germiyanoglu and Pınar Yüksel who contributed to the analysis of the findings gathered in the field research. I also would like to express my gratitude to Bianca Kaiser for her invaluable remarks and suggestions. Luigi Narbone, Phillipe Fargues and Luigi Achilli have also been very helpful with their comments and suggestions made to the paper during the Joint Session of Migration Working Group and Middle East Directions held on 27 September 2016 at the EUI, Florence. I want to express my appreciation for the feedback they have generously given. I need to express my appreciation for the feedback and constructive remarks of the two anonymous reviewers. I owe special gratefulness to Anna Triandafyllidou for her very insightful remarks, critics and suggestions to the manuscript as well as to her invaluable collegial support.

¹ For a detailed Account of the current state of the agreement see the Letter from President Juncker to the President and the Members of the European Council on progress in the implementation of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, Brussels, 17 October 2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-16-3465_en.htm . On the other hand, as opposed to what Jean-Claude Juncker said in his statement, some others claim the other way around, and point out that the agreement has failed and resulted with the deterioration of the state of refugees in the Greek islands. See Karnitschnig and Delcker (2016).

How do the Syrian refugees cope with the difficulties they come across in everyday life in Istanbul? This is the main research question to be answered in this paper. The main premise of the paper is that Syrians living in Turkey in general, and in Istanbul in particular, have not only chosen Turkey as a refuge because of its geographical proximity, but also because of its cultural intimacy stemming from the common Ottoman past. Referring to the findings of a recent survey conducted in Istanbul in late 2015 and early 2016, the paper will display to what extent Istanbul provides Syrian refugees with a comfort zone, or a space of cultural intimacy, where they feel safe and secure despite the difficulties of everyday life. The structure of the paper will be as follows: primarily, the methodology and the universe of the research will briefly be elaborated on so that the reader will have an understanding of the major districts of the city of Istanbul, where most of the Syrian refugees have found refuge. Secondly, the notion of *cultural intimacy*, from which the main rationale of this paper derives, will be theoretically discussed in relation to the writings of Michael Herzfeld (2005, 2013, 2016). Thirdly, a short literature survey will be undertaken to depict the state of Refugee Studies in Turkey, which appear to have two missing elements, namely a historicist perspective and the agency of refugees themselves. Fourthly, the legal status and the ways, in which Syrians have been framed by state actors since the early days of their arrival in Turkey, will be elaborated on in order to explicate the structural constraints, which form the ground for their societal exclusion and exploitation on the labour market as well as in other spheres of life. Fifthly, the main scope of this paper will be dedicated to discuss in detail the historical, cultural, religious and societal links bridging Aleppo and Istanbul, which provide Syrian refugees with a protective shield against the traumatic experiences resulting from the war and the act of resettlement. Eventually, the social networks followed by Syrian refugees and *the sense of safety, cultural intimacy, iconicity and comfort* as well as *the risk of exploitation* attached to them will be explained along with the testimonies from the fieldwork.

Methodology and the universe of the research

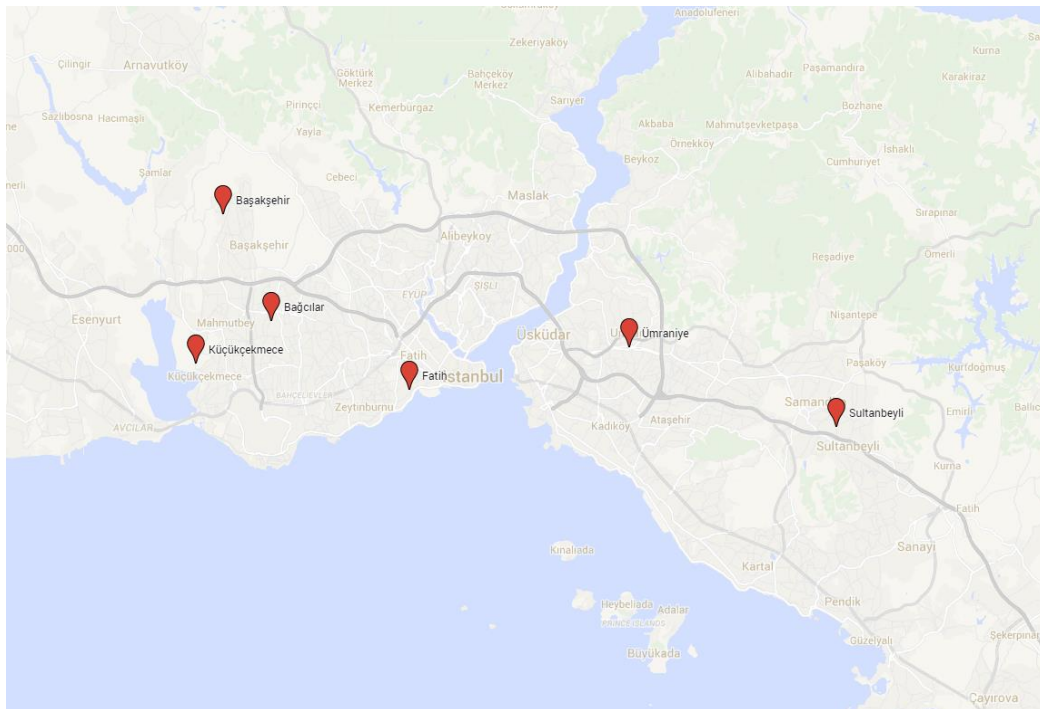
This work is based on the findings of a recent qualitative and quantitative study conducted in six districts of Istanbul between the last quarter of 2015 and the first quarter of 2016. Both Syrian refugees and Turkish receiving community members and organizations have been interviewed in one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions and via structured questionnaires. Six districts in Istanbul, namely Küçükçekmece, Başakşehir, Bağcılar, Fatih, Sultanbeyli and Ümraniye, have been surveyed in order to identify the needs and vulnerabilities of the Syrian refugee population in Istanbul. In order to identify a random sampling of the target population, in line with the requirements of statistical analysis, the districts were chosen due to their diverse geographic locations in Istanbul (four on the European and two on the Asian side of the city). These districts host the highest number of Syrians in Istanbul that are underserved, and often subject to live together with other marginalized communities in the city such as Kurds, Alevis, and the Roma. The needs assessment study has been carried out by the Support to Life Association (*Hayata Destek Derneği*) under the supervision of the author to collect data through a multitude of research technics: in-depth interviews conducted by Syrian-origin researchers as well as senior Turkish researchers in each of the six districts with key informants working in the host community for a total of 200 individuals. These included Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with both Syrian refugees (male and female) and the local host community members in each district (18 FGDs with Syrian refugees, 6 FDGs with host community members) with a total of 136 individuals; and Household (HH) Surveys which were conducted by Arabic-speaking Syrian assessment officers in each district with an estimated average of 6 individuals per household, amounting to a total of 124 surveys and 744 individuals (Kaya and Kırac, 2016). The quotations used in this work were taken from the focus group meetings to exemplify some of the mostly repeated statements and insights shared by the refugees and the local inhabitants.

The surveys and Focus Groups Discussions were conducted by Syrian researchers, who speak Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish (if necessary). The interviewers who conducted the structured surveys were themselves either ethnically Arabic or Kurdish Syrians, or Syrian-Palestinians. The survey

questions were written in English and then translated by the Syrian staff into Arabic. The interview teams were between 20-30 years of age. The field officers worked in teams, generally one male and one female officer, but if the interlocutor was not comfortable, same-sex teams were assigned on-demand. Essentially, if a woman was home alone and did not want a male in her home – the field supervisor would send two female officers to conduct the interviews. In-depth interviews with local stakeholders were conducted by Turkish-speaking Support to Life Association team members.

The research has been conducted in six districts of Istanbul hosting a very sizeable group of Syrians: *Fatih*, *Küçükçekmece*, *Başakşehir*, *Bağcılar*, *Sultanbeyli* and *Ümraniye*. *Fatih* is a district located in the European part of Istanbul and is named after Sultan Mehmet, the Conqueror of Constantinople. *Fatih* contains very cosmopolitan areas like *Aksaray*, *Fındıkzade*, *Çapa*, and *Vatan* Avenue. The district does not only host conservative background communities of Muslims but also many different international migrant communities ranging from transit migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to Syrian refugees, Central Asian Turkic migrants, Russian tourists as well as Armenians, Georgians, and many other groups. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *Fatih* is probably one of the most cosmopolitan urban spaces in the entire world. Besides its cosmopolitan context, it is also known for its extreme conservative image because of the religious community of the *Çarşamba* quarter within the district. *Fatih* also includes the historical peninsula of the city, *Sultanahmet*, with its historical Byzantine walls and very visible Ottoman heritage. It is this conservative, cosmopolitan and Ottoman heritage, which seems to be attractive to many Syrian refugees coming from Aleppo, which was the third most cosmopolitan Ottoman state after Istanbul and Izmir until the early 20th century (Watenpaugh, 2005). *Fatih* has recently become a diasporic space of intimacy for Syrian Arabs, where they have constructed a new home away from their original homeland, a "Little Syria".²

Map 1. Location of the 6 districts targeted for the needs assessment data collection



Source: Google Maps

² It has become very popular recently in the media to represent such diasporic spaces like *Fatih*, where Syrians are trying to reconstruct their new homes after the image of their original homeland. For related media coverage see Benjamin (2016).

Küçükçekmece lies on the European shore of the Sea of Marmara, in a lagoon named Lake *Küçükçekmece*. This district has recently hosted colossal public housing projects around the lake adjacent to old working-class neighbourhoods inhabited by many internally displaced Kurds originating from eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey (Kaya and Işık, 2008). These local Kurdish elements seem to have pulled Kurdish-speaking Syrian refugees to the district, who have followed already existing ethno-cultural networks.

Başakşehir is situated in the European part of Istanbul between the two sweet water reservoirs of the city, *Büyükçekmece* and *Küçükçekmece* lakes. This district is completely covered with large public housing complexes. This is why it offers a rich array of housing opportunities to these newcomers. Middle-class Syrian refugees also find it easier to be accommodated in this district due to such a rich housing market. The district has a huge service sector together with facilities of construction business.

Bağcılar is also located in the European part of the city, neighbouring Atatürk Airport. This neighbourhood has only been urbanized throughout the last three decades. Most of the houses in *Bağcılar* have been illegally built, *Gecekondu* (shanty towns), which are now being replaced by rows of cramped apartment buildings built with minimal regulation. It is particularly in this district that many public housing constructions can be found. *Bağcılar* is now populated by new immigrants from the southeastern parts of Anatolia, mostly young families, poor and internally displaced Kurds (IDPs) (Kaya and Işık, 2008). This district also hosts vibrant youth cultures, such as rap and graffiti. It is, at the same time, also a conservative, Islamist and right-wing stronghold with very strong support for the ruling AKP government. *Bağcılar* also houses a great amount of industry, particularly textile businesses, printing companies, TV channels, a huge wholesale market for dry goods, a large second-hand car market, and many trucking and logistics companies. Similar to the former Kurdish origin IDPs, Syrian refugees also mostly work in the informal labour market, predominantly in textile workshops and construction business.

Sultanbeyli is a working-class suburb on the Asian side of Istanbul. It is one of the electoral strongholds of Conservative-Islamist political parties, such as the ruling AKP government. This district houses several different religious communities attracting Syrian refugees as well. Eventually, *Ümraniye* is one of the largest working-class districts in Istanbul. Formerly, it was a *gecekondu* district hosting domestic migrants coming from eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey until the 1990s. Textile, construction and service sectors are very present in the district, and these sectors attract Syrian refugees to find jobs in the informal economy.

Cultural Intimacy and Iconicity

In his path-breaking ethnographic book, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, Michael Herzfeld (1997- Second Edition 2005) elaborated on what he called “cultural intimacy” generated by the Greeks, which is a strong sense of difference between what they presented to the outside and what they know about themselves on the inside. Herzfeld defines cultural intimacy as “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (2005:3). However, he later draws our attention to the fact that the term “cultural intimacy” was often perceived in the literature as the simple idea of acquaintance with a culture (Herzfeld, 2013: 491), which is also what I am more inclined to do in this paper. I will claim in this paper that Arabic-Speaking-Sunni-Syrians have already created comfort zones in various districts of Istanbul, which seems to provide them with a cultural intimacy with regard to religious, moral, architectural, urban, and sometimes linguistic similarities originating from the common Ottoman past of the Turks and the Arabs.

Herzfeld’s notion of cultural intimacy does not only refer to ‘the sharing of known and recognizable traits’ with the ones inside, but it also refers to those traits ‘disapproved by powerful

outsiders' (Herzfeld 1997: 94; Byrne, 2011: 148). I will argue that this second component of cultural intimacy comes into play when the Syrian refugees residing in Istanbul are asked to express their opinion about migrating further away to the European Union countries. As will be discussed shortly, the Syrian refugees interviewed in this study are predominantly willing to stay in Istanbul and not willing to go to Europe. Their hesitation to go to Europe seems to be deriving partly from their strong belief that they are disapproved by the Europeans, and partly from the life-threatening nature of the journey, which has already led to the death of thousands of people *en route*. It was often put forward by the interlocutors during the research that the tragedies that their Syrian fellows had to go through during their exodus from Syria to Greece have left very negative marks on them. The traces of the heart-breaking images of Ailan Kurdi, whose dead body was laying down on the Aegean shores of Bodrum, Turkey (Smith, 2015), were still fresh in the minds of the interlocutors when interviewed.

Herzfeld's notion of cultural intimacy includes various acts and attitudes repeated by members of a group of people, which lead to the formation of a Manichean understanding of the world divided between "us" and "them". These acts and attitudes may range from essentializing culture and past, practicing various stereotypes in everyday life, performing persuasive acts of resemblances, ordinary acts of embarrassment kept as intimate secrets of the group, and different forms of *iconicity*³ such as mythical, visual, musical and gastronomic images bridging a sense of resemblance with the other members of the group at large (Herzfeld, 2016, 3rd edition). According to Herzfeld (2016: 33), essentialization and reification of the past and culture is not only an ideological element instrumentalized by political institutions and states to control and manipulate the masses, but also an indispensable element of social life. Hence, ordinary individuals also tend to essentialize and reify the past for their own use to come to terms with the hardships of everyday life. Essentializing the past partly makes it possible for private individuals to create the semiotic effect of what Herzfeld (2016: 33) calls *iconicity*, the principle of signification by virtue of resemblance, which contributes to the formation of a Manichean understanding of the world divided between "us" and "them". Mythical, visual, musical, heroic, even gastronomic iconicities are all likely to contribute to the formation of this Manichean world (Herzfeld, 2016: 33). In this work, it will also be claimed that the Syrian refugees residing in Istanbul at large, and in conservative neighbourhoods in particular, are likely to construct bridges between themselves and the members of the majority society by means of visual, musical, religious, gastronomic, and even linguistic iconicities, which create a space of intimacy the host communities.

Refugee Studies in Turkey

This study, which we have conducted in Istanbul, certainly falls into the category of Refugee Studies, which is a rather newly developing field. Dawn Chatty and Philip Marfleet explain very eloquently how Refugee Studies was first born in the 1980s as a state-centric discipline and, like many other disciplines, defending the interests of nation-states, and how it has become more critical in due course (Chatty and Marfleet, 2013). There are two very essential elements that seem to be missing in Refugee Studies in Turkey. Firstly, scientific studies conducted in Turkey regarding the situation of Syrian refugees often contribute to their statisticalization rather than to make their social, economic and political expectations visible to the receiving society (*inter alia*, Gümüş and Eroğlu, 2015; Kilic and Ustun, 2015; Erdoğan, 2015; and Oytun and Şenyücel, 2015). Most of the studies in Turkey are either statisticalizing refugees, or concentrating on the host society's perceptions of refugees. What is missing here is the lack of anthropological research permitting the refugees to speak for themselves. As Gadi Benezer and Roger Zetter once stated very well, such an anthropological research could make

³ The term *iconicity* derives from the Greek word, *eikôn*, which literally means likeness conveying the imitation of the divine. However, in modern usage, the term *icon* carries a misleading meaning, which is often interchangeably used with "emblem". Michael Herzfeld's use of the term *iconicity* derives from its original meaning, which has something to do with resemblance. For further explanation on the term see Herzfeld (2016: 93).

it potentially easier to occupy a space within the host population as well as in the public domain (Benezer and Zetter, 2014). A point of view can be offered which includes, beside their trauma and sufferings, their active rather than passive stance and their resourcefulness, motivation and commitment that was needed in order to escape from their homelands and sanctuary.

Furthermore, what is also missing in Refugee Studies in Turkey is a retrospective analysis of refugee experiences in the country dating back to the early ages of the Republic as well as the Ottoman Empire. This is not only the missing link in the Turkish Refugee Studies field, but also the missing element in Refugee Studies in the rest of the world. Philip Marfleet relates this problem to the limitations of the nation-states: “If the territorial borders of modern states confined some people and excluded some others, “nationalized” intellectual agendas have largely excluded migration as a legitimate area of study” (Marfleet, 2013).

Actually, Anatolia has always been exposed to several different forms of refugee and migration practices throughout its history. Since the Byzantium era, Anatolia has hosted many different groups of people who found refuge in there. Anatolia has become gradually Muslimized throughout history along with the migration of dominantly Turkish and Muslim-origin populations. Jewish migration to the Ottoman Empire after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in 1492 was an exception. The Muslimization of Anatolia became even more visible in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire were shrinking rapidly (Erdoğan ve Kaya, 2015). The expulsion of Crimean and Circassian Muslims escaping from the atrocities of the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century was comparable in terms of size to the migration of Iranians, Turks, Kurds, Bosnians, Kosovars and Syrians escaping the violent conflicts in the Middle East and the Balkans starting in the early 1980s (Kaya, 2005).

The first wave of refugees in modern times was from Iran, following the 1979 Revolution. Other major refugee flows were Kurds escaping from Iraq in 1988, which numbered at almost 60,000; and in 1991, when half a million people from Iraq found safe refuge in Turkey. In 1989, with Bulgaria’s “Revival Process”, which was an assimilation campaign against minorities, almost 310,000 ethnic Turks sought refuge in Turkey. In the following years, during the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, Turkey granted asylum to 25,000 Bosnians and 18,000 Kosovars (Kirişçi and Karaca, 2015). Turkey has been positioned on the transit route for irregular migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan since the 1990s (İçduygu, 2015). Turkey is also a destination for human trafficking in the Black Sea region, with victims usually coming from Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. In the meantime, Turkey has long been a country of destination for immigrants from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, as these new immigrants see Turkey as a gateway to a new job, a new life, and a stepping stone to employment in the West (İçduygu, 2009). Its geographical location has made Turkey a crucial place on irregular migration routes, especially for migrants trying to move to EU countries. Turkey’s position in the migration process is a unique one and it is becoming an important site, not just for new national settlers, but also for today’s international settlers. Turkey, and especially Istanbul, has become a more complicated site demographically with the new arrivals, but not yet very visible, and other international migrants, mostly originating from the EU countries, especially from Germany and Russia.⁴ Obviously, Turkish migration and asylum laws and policies were not able to meet the needs of these radical demographic changes resulting from global and regional transformations. Thus, migration and asylum laws and policies had to go through a substantial review process to prepare the country to come to terms with the changing conditions in the region.

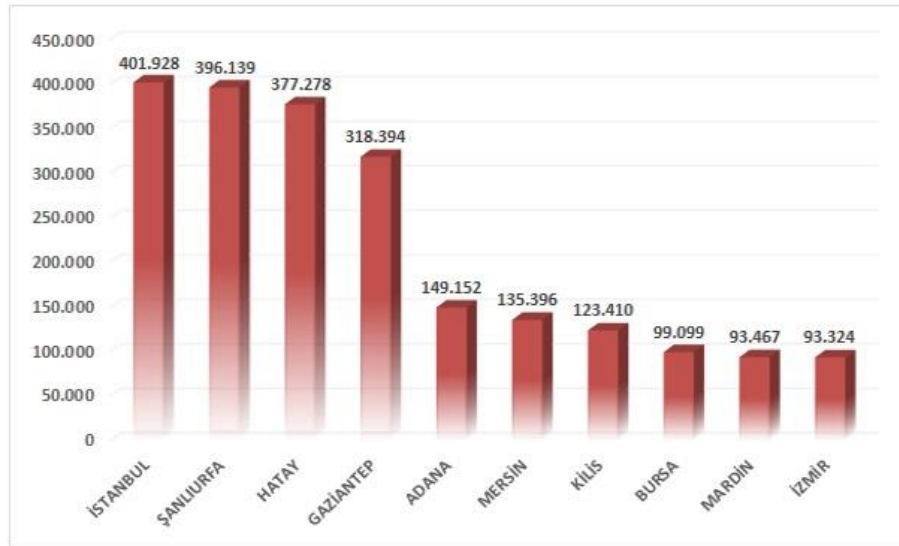
⁴ According to the EUROSTAT figures, there were 175,000 foreign citizens residing in Turkey, and 75,000 of them were EU citizens. The contradiction between national, European and other sources is a matter, which is also accepted by the staff of the Turkish Statistical Institution (TÜİK). See http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-11072012-AP/EN/3-11072012-AP-EN.PDF, accessed on 15 September 2015.

Temporary Protection: guests, but not refugees?

Traditionally known as emigration countries, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have also become settlement and transit spaces for economic and forced migrants (De Bel-Air, 2006; Pérouse, 2013). Syrian refugees have been considered as “guests” by the Turkish, Lebanese and Jordanian states. From the very beginning of the refugee plight, Syrians have been presented as if they are ‘welcome’ by the host states and societies on the basis of some deep-rooted values such the ‘Turkish hospitality’, ‘Muslim fraternity’, ‘Arab hospitality’ and ‘guesthood’ traditions (De Bel-Air, 2006; Pérouse, 2013; Chatty, 2013; El Abed, 2014; Kirişçi, 2014; Erdoğan, 2015; Erdoğan and Kaya, 2015). The reason why Turkey is trying to define the Syrians in a different legal status is because it continues to have the geographical limitation clause of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Protection of Refugees. Accordingly, Turkey only accepts those people as refugees if they are coming from the European countries. Although the geographical limitation was removed for most of the members by the 1967 Additional Protocol of the Geneva Convention, Turkey decided to keep it together with Congo, Madagascar and Monaco.

To this extent, a more recent metaphor to qualify the role that the Turkish state and the pious Muslim-Turks should play for Syrians in Turkey has been the *Ansar spirit* (Arabic for helpers). As a metaphor, *Ansar* refers to the people of Medina, who supported the Prophet Mohammad and the accompanying Muslims (*muhajirun*, or migrants) who migrated there from Mecca, which was under the control of the pagans. The metaphor of Ansar originally points at a temporary situation as the Muslims later returned to Mecca after their forces recaptured the city from the pagans (Korkut, 2015).⁵ Hence, the Turkish government has used a kind of Islamic symbolism to legitimize its acts on the resolution of the Syrian refugee crisis. The government leaders have consistently compared Turkey’s role in assisting the Syrian refugees to that of the Ansar, referring to the Medinans who helped Muhammad and his entourage. Framing the Syrian refugees within the discourse of *Ansar* and *Muhajirun* has elevated public and private efforts to accommodate Syrian refugees from a humanitarian responsibility to a religious and charity based duty (Erdemir, 2016), a point I shall return shortly.

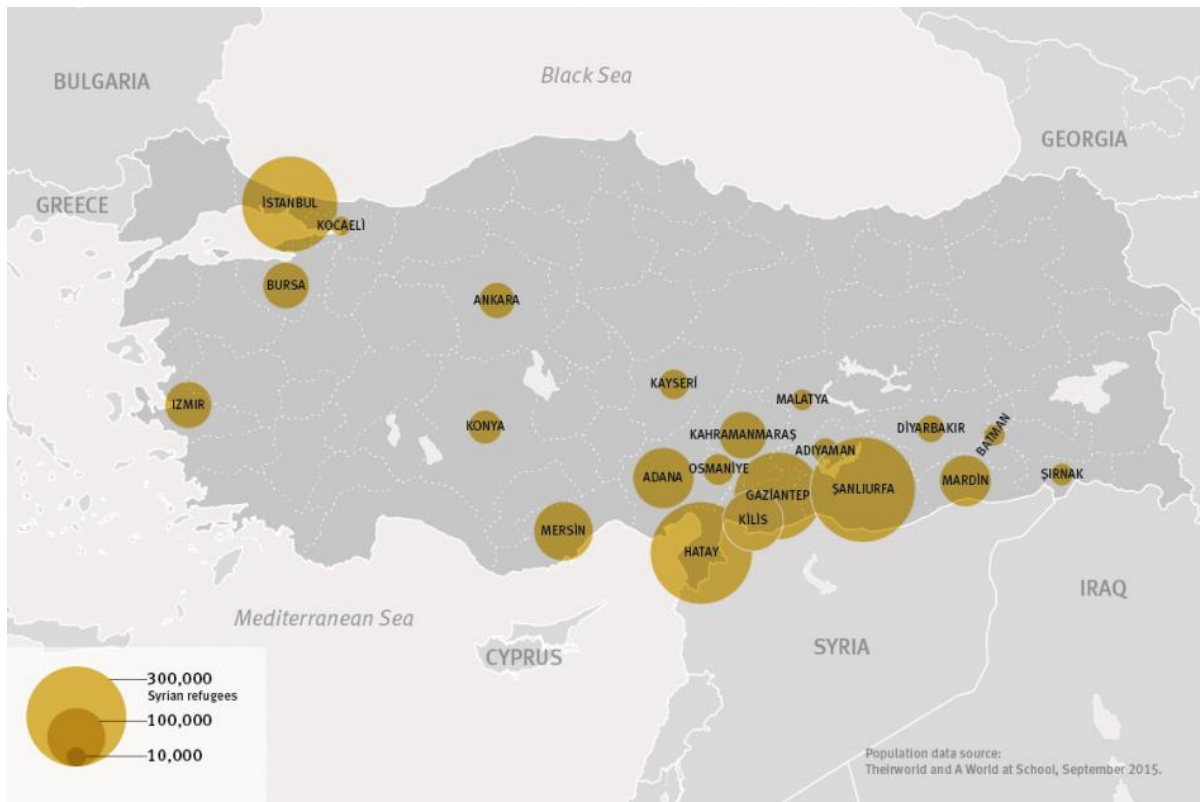
⁵ Haber7 (2014). “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Bizler Ensar sizler muhacir” (The President Erdoğan: We are Ansar you are muhacir), <http://www.haber7.com/ic-politika/haber/1208342-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-bizler-ensar-sizler-muhacir> accessed on 4 October 2016.

Table 1: Number of Syrian refugees living in 10 cities (20 October 2016, Ministry of Interior).⁶**SYRIANS UNDER TEMPORARY PROTECTION (TOP 10 PROVINCES)**

The framing of the refugee reality by state actors as an act of benevolence and tolerance has also shaped public opinion in a way which has led to the exposure of some racist and xenophobic attitudes vis-a-vis refugees. This is why it is not a surprise that Turkish society has witnessed several lynching attempts, stereotypes, prejudices, communal conflicts and other forms of harassments performed against Syrians (Gökay, 2015). The massive increase in the number of refugees outside camps and the lack of adequate assistance policies toward them has aggravated a range of social problems. Refugees experience problems of adaptation in big cities and the language barrier seriously has complicated their ability to integrate into Turkish society. There are several problems the Syrians have been facing in everyday life. There is now a growing concern about underage Syrian girls being forced into marriage as well as fears that a recent constitutional court ruling decriminalizing religious weddings without civil marriage will lead to a spread of polygamy involving Syrian women and girls (Kirişçi and Ferris, 2015). The sight of Syrians begging in the streets is causing particular resentment among local people, especially in the western cities of Turkey. There have also been reports of occasional violence between refugees and the local population. In turn, this reinforces a growing public perception that Syrian refugees are associated with criminality, violence and corruption. These attitudes contrast with local authorities' and security officials' observations that in reality, criminality is surprisingly low and that Syrian community leaders are very effective in preventing crime and defusing tensions between refugees and locals (Kirişçi and Karaca, 2015).

⁶ DGMM Figures http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik. The number of those living in the 22 refugee camps around the Turkish-Syrian border is more than 250.000.

Map 2. Syrian Refugees in Turkey, Source: Human Rights Watch



At times of economic and political instability, the nationalist and populist agenda has become more visible, and authorities attempt to generalize hostility towards others who are culturally, ethnically and religiously different. Refugees are easily portrayed as inferior, malign, dangerous or threatening.⁷ Lacking resources of public communication and relevant language skills, most of the refugees are unable to contest such labellings, stereotypes and xenophobic attitudes generated by the majority society (Marfleet, 2007). Such a xenophobic discourse was also employed by the main oppositional parties prior to the 07 June 2015 General Elections in their electoral campaigns. The Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) used a populist discourse scapegoating the Syrian refugees for the political, social and economic ills in Turkey. The Syrian refugees were instrumentalized by both parties to express their critics against the AKP, which they blamed for deepening the Syrian crisis in the first place, thus leading to the massive migration of Syrians to Turkey at the expense of Turkish citizens (Werz et al, 2015). Upon growing criticisms coming from civil society organizations and academics, it should also be noted here that both parties, especially the CHP, gave up such discourses prior to the second general elections held on 01 November 2015, and have since then used a rather constructive and friendly discourse vis-a-vis the Syrians.⁸ However, the party has not totally toned down its anti-refugee stance especially at the leadership level after the June 7 elections. When criticising the EU deal in March 2016, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the CHP

⁷ For a detailed account of the ways in which refugees have been portrayed in such terms see Wodak and van Dijk (2000), Walters (2006), and Inda (2006).

⁸ For further detail on the CHP's promises to the Syrians see Canyaş et al. (2015). One should also be reminded that the Kurdish-origin Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP) had prepared the most promising manifesto in both elections with regard to the promises to Syrian refugees living in Turkey. Furthermore, the CHP has prepared a very detailed report on Syrian refugees with the involvements of academics, NGOs, local municipalities and the Syrians themselves. See <http://www.igamder.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/SINIRLAR-ARASINDA-BASKI2.pdf>

uttered the following words: “Let’s give them [the European Union] 6 billion Euros, and they take all Syrians, Afghans, Pakistanis themselves”.⁹

Discursive shift from temporariness to permanency

Soon it turned out that framing the refugees as “guests” was not sustainable in terms of accommodating their urgent needs as well as of coming to terms with the increasing resentment among the local populations vis-à-vis the refugees. Turkey first introduced a Temporary Protection Directive for the refugees in 2014, based on Articles 61 to 95 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which came into force in April 2014. The directive grants almost all of the social and civil rights that refugees enjoy in western societies.¹⁰ Accordingly, Turkey has provided Syrians with temporary protection which consists of three elements: an open-door policy for all Syrians; no forced returns to Syria (non-refoulement); and unlimited duration of stay in Turkey.

Despite the rights granted under the Temporary Protection Directive dating from 04 April 2013, refugees have encountered huge problems in the spheres of health, education, labour market, and housing in Turkey.¹¹ Due to the fact that there are not very reliable and sufficient official data on the social-economic status of refugees, one cannot correctly make estimations about the number of refugee children who actually do enjoy the right to primary education, or of refugees who do have access to health care, or those given the right to work. It is estimated that around 30-35 percent of Syrian refugees in Turkey are school-aged children. This amounts to around 993,000 children that need to be attending school. While AFAD (Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Directorate) is providing education for children in 70 schools and the Ministry of Education is offering it in approximately 75 locations outside the camps, the number of children receiving education is around 300,000 compared to the half a million who need it. It is simply not feasible to accommodate such a high number of school children in the national education institutions in the entire country (Kılıç and Üstün, 2015).

Even if it is logistically and practically possible, a remarkable number of Syrian refugee families cannot register their children to school as they send them to work in informal labour market, mainly in textile, construction and service sectors. Child labour as a coping strategy is a common practice among the Syrian refugees living in Istanbul. For instance, our study in Istanbul revealed that 26,6 percent of the survey participants send their school-age children to work so that they could contribute to family income. 20,3 percent stated that they cannot afford to pay for their education, while 14,1 percent stated that schools do not accept them because there is not space for the children at the local schools. When the interlocutors were asked about the places where they send their children to work, half of those sending their children to work (26,6 percent) stated that their children work in textile sector (clothing, shoes, etc.) while the others work in service sector (small shops, catering, cafes, restaurants), construction sector and industrial sector (furniture factories, automobile factories, etc.) (Kaya and Kıracı, 2016).

Soon after the implementation of the Temporary Protection regulation, which still frame the refugees with a state of temporariness, some discursive shifts were witnessed in the media with regard to the state actors’ changing position on the permanent character of at least some of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. These discursive shifts have so far mainly emphasised the permanent nature of the issue - introduction of work permits in early 2016, incorporation of pupils into public schools, creating

⁹ For the media coverage of the statements of Kılıçdaroğlu see *Milliyet* (26 April 2016), <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/chp-lideri-kilicdaroglu-ndan-sert-siyaset/detay/2234227/default.htm>, and *Haber Türk* (12 March 2016), <http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1208609-kemal-kilicdaroglu-suriyeliler-butun-duzenimizi-bozacak>.

¹⁰ For the text of the Geneva Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees see <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

¹¹ For the official text of the Temporary Protection Regulation see http://www.goc.gov.tr/files/_dokuman28.pdf

quotas for Syrian students in higher education institutions, granting citizenship to the Syrians, and some statements from political figures such as the President Erdoğan and the Deputy PM Numan Kurtuluş.¹² It has become obvious that the Turkish state is more engaged now in integrating refugees to social, economic and political spheres of life as well as in trying to engage the local municipalities in taking responsibility in the integration of migrants and refugees.¹³

A tale of two cities: from Aleppo to Istanbul

There are several factors that set the ground for the Syrian Civil War. Socio-political, environmental, and economic elements such as unemployment, climate change, drought, water management stress, and poverty can be enumerated as some of the elements elevating the risk of a civil war. The unemployment rate in Syria used to be relatively moderate compared to other countries in the Middle East; however, youth unemployment rate was always high. The unemployment rate among youth aged between 15 and 24 stood at 26 percent in 2002, close to the Middle Eastern average (Kabbani and Kamel, 2007). What distinguished the Syrian case was that unemployment rates among young people were more than six times higher than those among adults, the highest ratio among the countries in the Middle East. This high rate of unemployment among the youth population triggered dissatisfaction against the regime of the Ba'ath Party and caused a brain drain of skilled workforce in the country. Another important factor, which is often neglected and, yet, is hugely important, are climate change and droughts (Schwartz and Notini, 1994; and Zachariah et al., 2001). Seven significant droughts occurred in Syria between 1900 and 2011, where the average rainfall dropped to one third of the normal level (Gleick, 2014). The latest one, which started in 2006, was described as the worst long-term drought, and most severe set of crop failures since agricultural civilizations began and caused agricultural failures, economic dislocations, and population displacement. These effects are attributed by some experts to be playing an essential role in spurring violence in the country (Femia and Werrell, 2012). During the civil war, access to clean water also deteriorated, threatening the health of the population. In 2013, UNICEF found that water availability in conflict-affected areas decreased to only one fourth compared to pre-crisis levels (UNICEF, 2013).

¹² For news coverage about President Erdoğan's discourse on the Syrians being granted citizenship, or dual nationality, see *Hurriyet Daily News* (11 July 2016), <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-details-dual-citizenship-for-syrians.aspx?pageID=238&nid=101428&NewsCatID=341>; and about Deputy PM Numan Kurtuluş's speech on granting citizenship to the Syrians see *Daily Sabah* (11 July 2016), <http://www.dailysabah.com/money/2016/07/11/turkish-citizenship-for-syrian-refugees-under-process-deputy-pm-kurtulmus-says>;

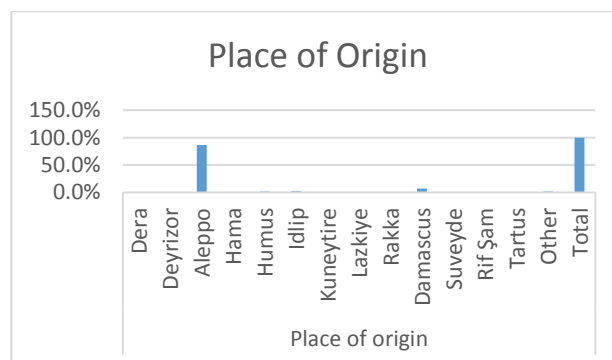
¹³ Due to the lack of space in this paper, I will not go into detail of the activities undertaken by the state actors, local municipalities and the civil society organizations in Turkey for the integration of refugees and migrants. International Organization of Migration (IOM) is recently working with a group of scholars on preparing policy recommendations on the integration of migrants in collaboration with the Directorate General of Migration Management. Hence, one could argue that the refugee crisis has also brought about some substantial changes in the mindset of the state actors to prepare a solid integration policy in Turkey. Anecdotal evidences Show that these attempts have increased in the aftermath of the Refugee Deal signed between Turkey and the EU on 18 March 2016.

Map 3. Aleppo Province in the late 19th century, Source: www.nizip.com.



The study on the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrians in Istanbul has found that around 87 percent of Syrians in Istanbul originate from the province of Aleppo, while only a small minority of 7.2 percent came from Damascus (Graph 1). The majority of the interlocutors interviewed (62.5 percent) entered Turkey through the Syrian border in Kilis, a southeastern city, while 16.7 percent entered from Hatay, and 9.2 percent from Gaziantep. Many of the interlocutors later followed their ethno-cultural and kinship networks leading them to Istanbul. In conflictual situations threatening the lives of locals, migrants are tempted to go to the remote places as far as their economic, social and cultural capital permits them to do so. Similarly, the reason why there are so many Syrians residing in the southeastern cities of Turkey such as Gaziantep, Hatay, Kilis and Şanlıurfa is again not only because of their geographical proximity but also because of kinship relations dating back to the Ottoman era when all those cities were administratively linked to the Aleppo province (*Vilayet*) of the Ottoman Empire. In the same way, Assyrian Christians, Circassians and Yezidis found refuge in those cities, where their kins had settled during the Ottoman Empire, such as Istanbul, Mardin and Şirnak (Korkut, 2015). This is what Nicolas van Hear has already indicated elaborately in his works on diasporas (van Hear, 1998; and 2004). The same inclination can also be found among Kurdish internally displaced persons, who had to leave their homelands in the southeastern parts of Turkey to go to different cities in the country, and even abroad if possible, since the mid-1990s (Kaya ve Işık, 2008).

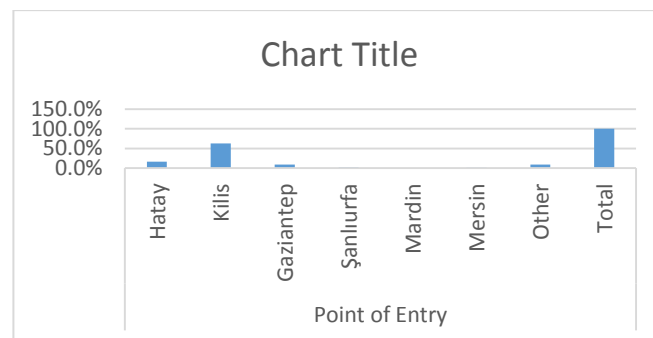
Graph 1. Place of origin of Syrians in Istanbul



With the conflict in Syria now entering its sixth year, refugees are increasingly moving inland, beyond the border provinces. The Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) has reported that 220,000 Syrians (or 12 percent of the entire Syrian refugee population in Turkey) are registered in Istanbul as of March 2015. By July 2015, the number increased to over 317,000 with an

increase of 64 percent, while figures reached 395,000 by March 2016, particularly as irregular migration into Europe has increased. In the second half of 2016 some estimates are even as high as 550,000 and these numbers are still growing. In just a four-month period between March 2015 and July 2015, the number of registered Syrians in Istanbul has increased by 64 percent (Graph 2). There are many reasons for families and individuals to move away from camps, and according to previous researches, many chose to relocate to urban centres due to the freedom of mobility which allows Syrians an opportunity to find networks. Additionally, urban settings potentially allow for better housing, better educational opportunities and more diverse, stable employment opportunities. Of course, the perception gap between urban settings and the reality, especially in a major metropolitan city, cannot be denied. Istanbul is the most attractive city where Syrian refugees of all ethnic backgrounds prefer to settle in.

Graph 2. Point of entry into Turkey



One of the most striking images about Aleppo was portrayed on 17 August 2016 when the image of a five-year-old boy, Omran Daqneesh, was filmed and circulated by the Aleppo Media Centre, an anti-government activist group which posted a video on YouTube showing him sitting dazed and bloodied in the back of an ambulance after surviving a regime airstrike on the rebel-held Qaterji neighbourhood of Aleppo (Hunt, 2016). Following the images of Ailan Kurdi's dead body lying down on the Aegean shores of Turkey in the summer of 2015, Omran immediately became another icon symbolizing the devastation and tragedy caused by the war in Syria, just like all the other wars. Similar to the majority of Syrians residing in Turkey, Ailan was also from the Province of Aleppo (Smith, 2015).

Aleppo is one of the fourteen provinces of Syria, which is located in the northern part of the country between Idlib in the west, Hama in the south and Ar-Raqqah in the east. Before the war, it was the most crowded province in Syria with a population of more than 4,868,000 in 2011, almost one fourth of the total population of Syria. The province of Aleppo has the fifth biggest portion of Syria. Its capital is the city of Aleppo. The city of Aleppo was the second largest city in Syria with a population of more than 1.5 million people. It was the country's most important centre for trade and manufacture and its central market area –*souq* [bazaar] - used to stretch out for more than 10 km in the middle of the city. There were small shops, stalls, warehouses and workshops crowding the narrow streets and alleys. The Aleppo *souq* was very important for the local, regional and national economy, but it had also become a tourist attraction, and it was described in glowing and romantic terms in local and foreign guidebooks. The unchanging and historical nature of the *souq* was highlighted, and the economy and ethos of the *souq* were portrayed as radically different from the rest of the city. Such descriptions fit into a 'culturalistic' view where the Middle Eastern *souq* was regarded as a symbol of tradition, unaffected by social change, and where people working there were bound together by affective ties (Rabo, 2006). These depictions have been paraphrased in the words of Annika Rabo, a social anthropologist, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Aleppo between 1997 and 2003. The city is in ruins now and its inhabitants have scattered around, mostly in Turkey. The reason why almost all of the former inhabitants of the province of Aleppo have found refuge in Turkey is not its geographical proximity. The reason is more complicated than that, and there are strong historical,

cultural and religious links between Aleppo and Anatolia dating back to the Ottoman Empire. In what follows here is a more detailed depiction of the history of the city traced back to the Ottomans.

Ottoman authorities did not enumerate people using modern notions of race or ethnicity, and instead counted people on the basis of religion. However, the population description from the 1903 edition of Aleppo's *Salname*, the provincial yearbook, provides a hint of this continuing cosmopolitanism, as well as changes in the bureaucratic formulation of difference (Watenpaugh, 2005). It is recorded that in Aleppo there were Muslim Turks, Arabs, Turkomans, Circassians, Kurds, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Armenians, Syriacs, Maronites, Protestants, Chaldeans, Latin Catholics, and Jews. A plurality of the city's inhabitants was Turkish or Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims, and 30 percent of the city's population were Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews (both Mizrahi and Sephardic) (*Salname*, 1903). By 1922, alongside Beirut, it had become the chief resettlement centre for more than 50,000 primarily Turkish-speaking Armenian refugees from Anatolia. In the aftermath of the Ottoman hegemony (1918), most of the Turks were asked to leave the city by the Pan-Arabic nationalists guided by Prince Faisal, the Emir of Hijaz, who obtained the support of the British and had embarked upon the 'liberation of the nation'. Prince Faisal was a member of the Hashemites originating from the Prophet Mohammad's lineage. The latest demographic data about the city is available from the 1957 census, and the data show that the city was mainly populated by Sunnis (1,045,455) and Christians (around 150,000) (Table 2) (Watenpaugh, 2005).

Table 2. The Population of Syria by religious communities and *Muhafaza* in 1957

	Damascus	Aleppo	Homs	Hama	Latakia	Hasaka	Dayr al-Zur	Suwayda	Dar'a	Total
Sunnis	732,926	1,045,455	240,886	171,868	105,943	227,629	315,669	2,221	150,788	2,993,385
Shi'is	557	10,574	4,152	190	2	0	0	54	4	15,533
Isma'ilis 71	44	251	35,537	5,111	16	21	0	0	41,051	
Alawites	6,094	3,909	61,177	67,896	297,403	128	129	92	378	437,206
Greek Orthodox	32,667	12,537	57,926	28,056	42,172	408	257	6,461	3,918	184,402
Greek Catholic	25,948	14,725	8,344	569	1,058	74	18	3,830	6,858	61,424
Jews	14,637	14,859	0	0	7	2,456	60	0	4	32,023
Latins	668	4,924	565	16	892	31	28	0	0	7,124
Syrian Orthodox	1,486	7,025	17,483	859	27	32,279	921	0	59	61,139
Syrian Catholic	4,086	7,458	3,954	434	0	7,092	846	0	0	23,870
Chaldeans	326	2,609	35	2	54	3,375	287	0	0	6,688
Protestans	2,126	3,902	2,744	865	2,913	692	33	450	50	13,775
Maronites	1,722	4,322	2,163	1,276	8,303	59	88	108	4	18,045
Armenian Orthodox	17,914	76,065	1,746	909	4,530	11,212	1,536	445	41	114,398
Armenian Catholic	2,677	11,972	1,579	91	528	2,714	806	154	122	20,643
Druzes	21,508	1,232	24	13	22	11	35	106,959	9	129,813
Yazidis	9	1,368	1	1	7	1,196	7	0	0	2,589
Total	865,422	1,222,980	403,030	308,582	468,972	290,372	321,499	120,774	162,235	4,163,108

(Source: Etude sur 'La Syrie Economique 1957', Annex 8). (Minor discrepancies in totals are due to the original source)

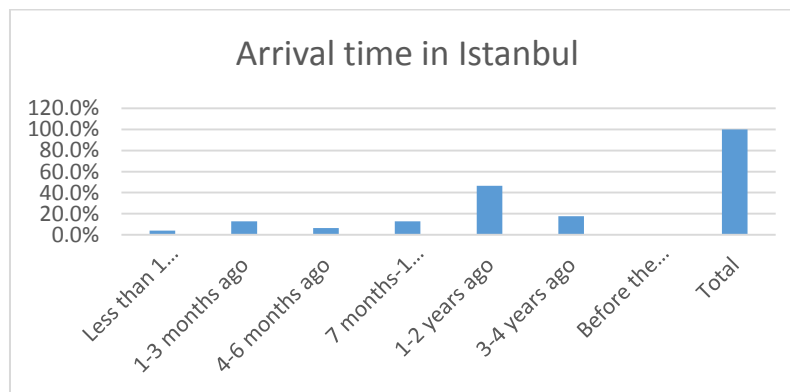
In the early days following the end of World War I, a secular form of Pan-Arab nationalism made it possible for the inhabitants of Aleppo to live together in peace. A striking feature of the Pan-Arab nationalism was that it was mainly constructed as a response to the Pan-Turkist ideology of the Ottoman elite, which had become outspoken and popular among Turkish nationalists in the late 19th century (Çatı, 2013). Pan-Arab nationalism was based on the secular idea that the Arab is a non-sectarian designation and that Muslims, Christians and Jews could be equally Arab and possess the same rights to full citizenship. In this version of Arabism, Islam had no role in governance or the basis

of legitimate authority. It should be recalled that Islamism in the Arab world partly emerged as a reaction against the imperialist division of Ottoman Muslims into separate states and the non-sectarian, emancipatory and bourgeois dimensions of interwar liberal Arab nationalism (Watenpaugh, 2005; and Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015).

Following the social networks

Almost half of the interlocutors who were interviewed arrived in Istanbul in the previous one or two years (46.4 percent). On the other hand, 17.6 percent stated that they have been in Istanbul for the last three to four years. 36 percent of the interlocutors stated that they have only recently arrived in Istanbul (Graph 3). This finding indicates that there will be more to arrive through their networks. There are several theories, such as push and pull theory and rational choice theory, to be used to define the reasons and motives of migration. Probably, the Network Theory is the most applicable one to the case of Syrian Refugees living in Istanbul. The Network Theory is one of those theories that try to provide an empirical explanation of migration motives. Networks can be regarded as one of the main reasons of migration which serve as strong ties between migrants and potential migrants (king, 2012). These connections often become a social formation, which helps potential migrants as well as new migrants find their ways in the society where the old migrants have already established their lives. There are three types of networks: *family networks*, *labour networks* and "*illegal*" *migrant networks* (Boyd and Nowak, 2012). Labour networks are used widely, and it seems that it is also very explanatory for the Syrian refugees. Labour networks are widely applied in the process of migration. Not only do they help potential migrants in obtaining information about the availability of job vacancies, but also help new migrants settle before starting a job. Even though applying to labour networks might be helpful it should be highlighted that they cannot always be trusted. During the interviews, several interlocutors stated that their jobs had been provided to them via labour networks but then turned out to have poor working conditions as well as low salaries, which were not provided on time either.

Graph 3. Arrival time in Istanbul



Secondly, family networks provide new migrants with the feeling of hospitality, spaces of intimacy and a sense of familiarity, and help them preserve their culture and close ties with their families (Castles et al., 2013). According to Charles Tilly, even though networks can be beneficial on the other hand they may also create problems for the people who do not accomplish their commitment to society (Tily, 2007). Being a member of a network comes with obligations, and once the mission is not fulfilled it may cause exclusion of individuals from the networks. The other type of networks is illegal networks, which include human trafficking and smuggling. As noted by Boyd and Nowak illegal migrants try to have less ties with family or labour networks (Boyd and Nowak, 2012). Accordingly,

they do not engage in legal networks, but they try to find jobs through illegal connections. In this fieldwork, we have not come across such networks as reported by the interlocutors.

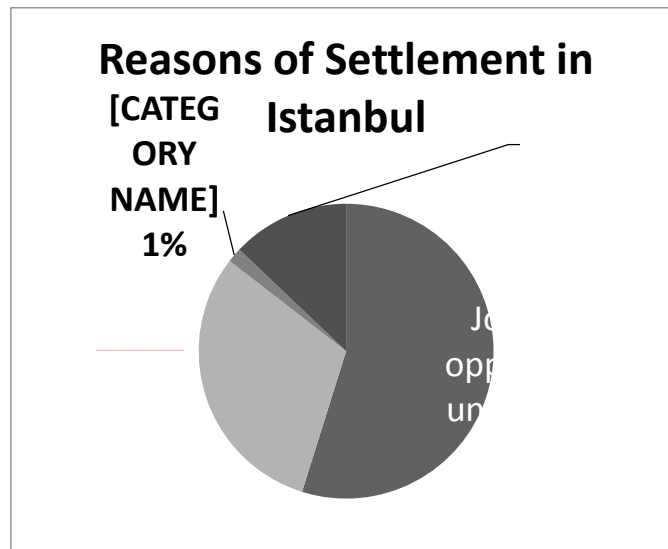
Potential migrants and refugees tend to choose their places of migration according to the countries where they already have friends or family members or people they know, who come from their home countries. In this way, they can easily get information about the city they are planning to migrate to (King, 2012). The information reduces anxiety that potential migrants tend to have before they make decision about their destination. Networks can be regarded as one of the important clusters among migrants' location choices. On the other hand, having networks eases the process of making decisions about the country of migration and render the process of integration much faster. Therefore, having networks in the country of destination can be one of the main reasons for migration for refugees, as well as for regular migrants (King, 2012). Once the first wave of migrants has settled in their new places of residence, they assist family members or friends in order to join them. Accordingly, the migration process for the second wave is made easier considering the costs and risks. Due to having information about previous examples, the migrant has the feeling of security and protection. This is what our research team has come across very often in the field. Most of the refugees try to establish stronger ties with previously migrated people in order to reduce their own costs and risks.

Even though one of the strongest components of the network theories can be the family networks, weak ties may also play a significant role in the migration process (Tily, 2007). Relations between refugees and potential refugees may be weak, but once they are in a foreign environment these ties become even closer as they share the same language, ethnicity, culture, and religion. Therefore, they develop a mutual reliance on each other. This is what we have observed in focus group meetings, where we encountered many refugees originating from different cities and neighbourhoods in Syria, and who have established closer links in their places of residence in Istanbul. These relations often turn into close friendships as they try to provide information for each other, reducing costs, and comforting and consoling each other in terms of relieving the pains experienced in the migration process. Most importantly, new refugees are eager to get familiar with the experiences of the people who have migrated before them. It should be highlighted that networks, as one of the significant reasons for migration, have become more evident and useful as the internet has become more accessible to the wider society. Networks may also play a significant role before the act of migration. Being aware of existing networks, potential migrants are likely to walk the same path already experienced by other refugees, rather than taking the risk of migration without any actual information (Massey and Garcia-Espana, 1987). Such networks have the potential of providing refugees with a shield protecting them against the detrimental effects of a difficult journey and everyday life, as well as with a sense of ethno-cultural, religious, musical, visual and linguistic *iconicity* that gives them comfort and cultural intimacy in the land of the unknown. Thanks to the growing visibility of the internet in everyday life, refugees have been utilizing such networks to decide about their routes (Rebmann, 2016).

Istanbul is safe despite everything!

Survey results have shown that the primary rationale behind moving to Istanbul is to find a job (54.8 percent). The second most expressed reason is to follow existing social networks such as family ties, relational links and other relevant social, ethno-cultural and religious networks. The third reason for refugees to settle in Istanbul seems to be providing security and safety for their families (Figure 1). What is striking here is the very low percentage of Syrians who are willing to live anywhere else than Istanbul. One could argue that Syrians residing in Istanbul are rather satisfied with where they are, and they are not considering to go elsewhere, such as for instance EU countries.

Figure 1. Reasons of settlement in Istanbul



Marwa, a 28-year-old female living in the *Sultanbeyli* district on the Asian side of Istanbul, utters her feelings about Istanbul with the following words:

“I feel safe here in Istanbul, and I don’t want to go back to Aleppo where we were moving from house to house due to the war. I want to stay here in Turkey, because it is similar to our traditions and culture, and my family is here. I don’t want to go to Europe either, because I have no one there. And I don’t want to go back to Syria at all, because I lost my husband there.”

What attracts her to Istanbul is the cultural intimacy that the city offers as well as familial links already existing here. The research, which we have conducted together with the Support to Life Association, was undertaken in districts where mostly Sunni Arabs are residing. The staff of the Migration Unit of the *Şişli* Municipality in Istanbul has reported there in some parts of their districts there are quite a number of Kurdish-origin and Alevi-origin Syrians who have been searching for comfort and cultural intimacy in their own already existing social networks constructed by the Kurdish and Alevi inhabitants living mostly in *Okmeydanı*, one of the strongholds of left-wing oppositional groups with a working-class and ethno-class background.¹⁴

The selection of the places of residence by the Syrian refugees is made in accordance with several different factors, some of which have been explained earlier. Cultural intimacy and ethno-religious affinity are the decisive elements shaping the decision with regard to the selection of the place of residence. The ways in which the host communities perceive the Syrian refugees is also a very important factor in shaping this decision. It is also revealed in other scientific studies that the host communities living in the border regions form their approach towards Syrians in accordance with their own ethnic, religious and political identities. For instance, there is sympathy towards the Kurds and a dislike against the Arabs in the places that Kurds constitute the majority. Kurds strongly assume that Arabs support radical groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, or al Nusra, who are believed to be fighting against the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) and YPG (People's Protection Units) forces in Syria. Whereas, Arabs believe that Kurds seek to divide Syria and support the PKK-affiliated parties. A big number of the Turkish citizens sympathize with Turkmens, while most of the Arab Alevis consider the Syrians entering Turkey as traitors to their own country. This is the reason why Syrians tend to move to places in Turkey, where people with similar ethnic, religious or sectarian identities live (Orhun, 2014; Erciyes, 2016).

¹⁴ Author’s interview with the staff of the Migration Unit of *Şişli* Municipality, Feriköy, *Şişli*, Istanbul, 28 July 2016.

It was also revealed that majority of the local residents in the six districts where we conducted the research have been supportive the rhetoric of *Ansar Spirit* reified by the state actors in general and the government in particular. The *Ansar Spirit* has been embraced by the pious Muslim Turkish citizens who perceive the Arabs and the Arabic language they speak as sacred. The fact that Prophet Mohammad was of Arab origin, and the language of Quran is Arabic makes a lot of sense for the pious Muslims in Turkey as well as in other non-Arabic geographies of Islam. The members of the local communities in the six districts of Istanbul run by the municipalities of the Justice and Development Party have often referred to the cultural and religious intimacy which they have practiced in everyday life with the Sunni-Arabs coming from Syria. Hence, religious and linguistic iconicities are not only instrumentalized by the Sunni-Muslim-Syrian refugees, but also by the members of the Sunni-Muslim local communities who have already reified the language and the ethnicity of the Sunni Arabs (Kaya and Kıraç, 2016; and Deniz et al., 2016).

This kind of *iconicity* is not only limited to religious and linguistic levels, but also to gastronomic and musical tastes of both sides. The number of Syrian restaurants is rapidly increasing in Istanbul, not only in those six neighbourhoods where we conducted our research on the vulnerability of the Syrian refugees, but also in the touristic centres of the city such as Beyoğlu and Sultanahmet. These restaurants do not only attract the Arabs who feel a kind of cultural intimacy with the food and beverages served there, but also the locals of Istanbul who also feel a similar cultural intimacy with the Arabic cuisine, which has always been an essential part of the cosmopolitan Ottoman cuisine. Similarly, the number of Syrian street music bands is also increasing. Radio stations such as *Al-Kol*, *Muftah* and *Alwan* were established in Istanbul to broadcast not only to the Syrian Diaspora in Turkey but also to the homeland in Syria.¹⁵ The sound of Arabic music echoing in the streets of Istanbul as well as in the Arabic radio stations construct new bridges between the Syrian refugees and the members of the local communities who are somehow appealed to it by virtue of resemblance with the popular Turkish Arabesque music.

The history of *arabesk* music in Turkey starts with the internal migration from rural spaces to urban spaces since early 1960s. It is an epiphenomenon of urbanisation. *Arabesk* is primarily associated with music, but also with film, novels and foto-roman (photo dramas in newspapers with speech bubbles). *Arabesk* music is a style which is composed of western and oriental instruments with an Arabic rhythm. This syncretic form of music has always borrowed some instruments and beat of the traditional Turkish folk music. The presence of the *arabesk* music on TV was banned by the state until the early eighties. The conservative-populist government of Turgut Özal set it free in the mid-eighties. The main characteristics of *arabesk* music are the fatalism, sadness and pessimism of the lyrics and rhythm. Hitherto, the lyrics were composed of an irrational and pessimist reaction of people with a rural background to the capitalist urban life. Recently, the composition of the lyrics has extensively changed. Instead of expressing pessimism in the urban space, lyrics tend to celebrate the beauty of the pastoral life which has been left behind. In other words, it has become a call to the people to go back to basics. It should be pointed out that there is an extensive literature on the sociological dimensions of the *arabesk* music in Turkey (Stokes, 2010). Martin Stokes (2010) has also shown how the fortunes of supposedly Arabic musical forms actually vary with the political winds. Today, arabesque music is likely to create a space of cultural intimacy and iconicity among the Syrians and the Turks living in the suburbs of Istanbul.

However, some locals do not seem to be so much at ease with the *Ansar Spirit*. Treating the Syrians as “traitors” seems to be a common phenomenon among many Turks. One of the Turkish youngsters

¹⁵ For the media coverage of the Syrian-origin radio stations founded in Istanbul see some examples such as <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/life-style/art-and-culture/2013/04/07/Syrian-opposition-radio-station-launches-from-Istanbul.html>; <http://muftah.org/sout-roya-a-syrian-voice-broadcasting-from-istanbul/#.WAdcPuh9600>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30015656>; and http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/04/160418_istanbul_suriye_radyo .

we interviewed in the Sultanbeyli district of Istanbul, expressed his dislike against the Syrian refugees settled in his neighbourhood with the following words:

"Everyone around me hates the Syrians. People are curious to know why the Syrians came to Turkey. If I were them I wouldn't leave my country. I would stay home and fight back against the enemy to protect my homeland. Syrians are coward, that is why they left their country. They are traitors. Our country has accepted them as no one else is really accepting them. We are treating them well, but we are not getting anything good in return" (20, male, 16 November 2015, Sultanbeyli).¹⁶

This kind of discourse has also recently become rather popular, especially after a popular conservative-pious-Muslim poet, İsmet Özel, treated the Syrian refugees in the same way as "traitors".¹⁷ Defining the Arabs as traitors in Turkey is actually a rather old habit dating back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Turkish nationalists perceived the Arabs in those days as "traitors" since they believed that the Arab nationalists stabbed the Turks on their back by collaborating with the imperialist western forces.¹⁸ Such a stereotype is still very strong in collective memory of the Turkish citizens.

When refugees were asked about how safe they feel in Istanbul, the majority have expressed feelings of safety (91.8 percent) while only 6.8 percent stated an uneasiness regarding safety in the city. Being away from the war zone and everyday terrors of violence in Aleppo, coupled with cultural intimacy and religious familiarity, have been reported as the main determinants of a feeling of safety and comfort for refugees in Istanbul, although women tend to feel slightly more in the extremes in terms of safety and insecurity in the city compared to Syrian men, who are in the more moderate to safe range of the spectrum. Mohammad, a 27-year-old male whom we have interviewed in *Ümraniye* explained his reason of picking up Istanbul to live in the following words:

"I came here two years ago through the Turkish-Syrian border. I had to pay a lot of money to the smugglers. Turkey was my first choice, because there is better treatment here compared to other neighbouring countries in the region. And I feel safe here in Istanbul."

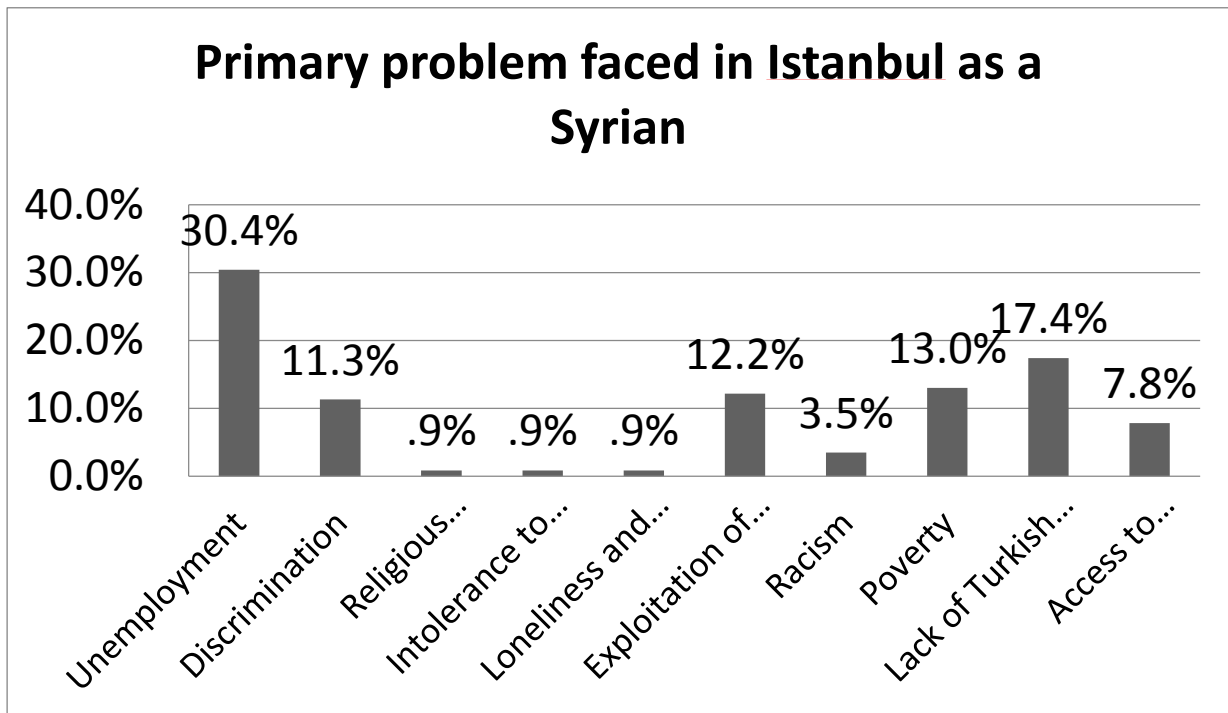
Syrian refugees were also asked to report about the problems that they face in everyday life: 30.4 percent of the interlocutors complained about unemployment, while others respectively complained about their lack of knowledge of the Turkish language (17.4 percent), poverty (13 percent), exploitation (12.2 percent), discrimination (11.3 percent), and limited access to social services (7.8 percent) (Graph 4). Poverty, exploitation, exclusion, and discrimination are the major problems stated by refugees. The cross-tabulations by gender indicate that women tend to feel more exposed to discrimination and racism in everyday life. Focus group discussions reveal that women are in a situation to negotiate more in everyday life with the members of the majority society with respect to handling the relations within their neighbourhood. Women are confronted with more problems while carrying out household chores and caring for family members, such as buying groceries, schooling of children, seeking health care, and finding their way around the city.

¹⁶ Original Turkish text of the interview: "*Çevremdeki herkes Suriyelilerden nefret ediyor. İnsanlar merak ediyorlar Suriyelilerin neden Türkiye'ye geldiğini. Ben onların yerinde olsaydım, ülkemi terketmezdim, orada kalır ve vatanımı düşmanlara karşı savunurdum. Suriyeliler korkak; o nedenle ülkelerini terkettiler. Onlar vatan hainidir. Bizim ülkemiz onları kabul etti, başka ülkeler onları almıyor bile. Biz onlara iyilik yapıyoruz, ama karşılığında iyilik görmüyoruz.*"

¹⁷ For the speech of İsmet Özel see the following video recorded on 14 December 2015, <https://twitter.com/fazzare/status/677191012738011140>

¹⁸ For further discussion on such stereotypes see Pope and Pope (1997).

Graph 4. Primary problem faced in Istanbul as a Syrian

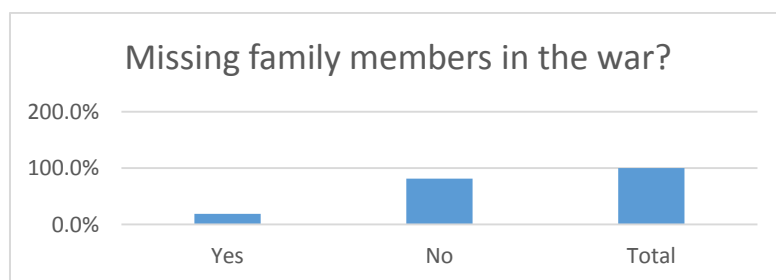


Abo Bashar, a 55-year-old male residing in *Ümraniye*, has drawn our attention to the difficulties of living in a city like Istanbul, though he has added that he is happy there:

“I am happier here though it's hard. Because the treatment here is better than it is in the other countries. I am not planning to travel to any other country, but will go back to Syria one day. We wish that we had a work permit, and that the employers paid us a better salary. We don't want to work under such conditions. We wished people here would treat us better and give us more assistance because we receive nothing. And we wished the landlords would go easy on us and take from us what the contract says they must take.”

The will to return to Syria is still very strong, but of course it all depends on the improvement of political situation in the homeland.

Graph 5. Missing family members in the war?



However, among the Syrians we interviewed there is a very critical group of people who expressed their unwillingness to go back to Syria under any condition. Around 20 percent of the people interviewed expressed their unwillingness to go back home. It has later found that this group of 20 percent people correspond to the ones who lost beloved ones in their immediate families (Graph 5). Hence, one could argue, that at least those who have lost family members in the civil war are not

willing to go back, at least for the time being, due to the traumatic experience resulting from their losses.

As far as the exploitation of refugees is concerned, it is seen in the field research that cultural intimacy in the form of 'the sharing of known and recognizable traits' with the ones inside" may also play a negative role in everyday life. It is often revealed in migration studies that refugees and migrants are more likely to be exploited by their own kins, relatives, families as well as by those locals who have a cultural, religious and linguistic intimacy with them (Danis, 2007; Pessar, 1999). For instance, in the course of the research, we encountered Syrian refugees who were employed by those textile workshop owners who speak Arabic. These interlocutors explicitly complained about the exploitation they were exposed to. Healy et al. (2015) also found that much of the exploitation taking place among the Syrian refugees living in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq is not carried out by organised transnational groups, but rather involves acquaintances, neighbours and even family members. Hence, one should not forget about the fact that cultural intimacy has an ambivalent nature as a space of both comfort and danger. There should be more scientific studies concentrating on the correlation between cultural intimacy and different patterns of exploitation taking place amongst refugees.

Conclusions

This research, which has been conducted in six different districts of Istanbul (*Küçükçekmece, Başakşehir, Bağcılar, Fatih, Sultanbeyli* and *Ümraniye*) run by mayors of the Justice and Development Party has revealed that Syrian refugees residing in these districts predominantly originate from Aleppo, which was the third most cosmopolitan city of the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Izmir. It has been argued that refugees follow already existing social, ethno-cultural and religious networks, the origins of which could be found in the past. It has been stated by most of the refugees that it is this cultural and religious intimacy, which has made them feel rather comfortable in Istanbul. It has also been stated by the majority of the interlocutors that the reason why they have chosen Istanbul, is the feeling of security and safety that the city is providing them.

However, they also have many complaints. Exploitation on the labour market, the lack of knowledge of the Turkish language, discrimination in everyday life, lack of empathy among the locals towards their sufferings, stereotypes, and prejudices generated by the locals, the lack of education facilities for their children, the lack of a proper legal status, the lack of the right to work legally, the lack of the right to health services, the lack of the right to housing, the lack of future prospects in this country, the lack of integration policies at central and local levels, the lack of social and political recognition, respect, and acceptance, and the ways in which they are labelled by the central state as "guests" are some of the problems they face in everyday life. It is exactly these problems which, in the end, prompt some refugees to leave Turkey at the expense of risking their lives at the border.

Nevertheless, what came out as a surprise is the very low number of refugees among those interviewed who stated their willingness to go to Europe. It was found that only 1.6 percent of the refugees interviewed were considering to leave Istanbul for the purpose of travelling to the EU countries. But it does not mean that the situation is the same for all the Syrians living in Turkey. With more than 500.000 Syrian population, Istanbul has recently become the new capital city of Syrians offering its refugee-origin inhabitants with the opportunities feel contend with the cultural intimacy and *iconicity* that the city offers, and to disappear in crowds so that they could relatively enjoy accommodation facilities, employment, possibilities, schooling, health services, in-kind assistance and several other services without being stigmatized. However, the comfort zones created by cultural intimacy are also embedded with potential sources of danger and exploitation operated by acquaintances, neighbours and even family members of the refugees.

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