Unravelling Histories of Displacement: The Protracted Refugeehood of Syrian Kurds in Istanbul

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Abstract

This paper critically engages with Turkey's refugee governance by offering insight into the daily struggles, aspirations, and longings of Syrian Kurdish migrants living in the inner-city neighbourhood of Demirkap?, Istanbul. It aims to sketch a multifaceted Kurdish geography of displacements beyond nation-state borders and to show how social differences and hierarchies of class, gender, and ethnicity shape greatly the experiences of the groups living in the neighbourhood. The paper is based on an ethnographic field research that consists of first-hand observations, conversations, and 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Kurdish migrants. The emplaced, ethnographic research is particularly promising to understand the daily lives of migrants and their multi-layered history of displacement and migration within and across borders. This history, we underscore, is not a past history, but one that unfolds in the present, within the current social hierarchies and in the midst of the ongoing crises in Syria and Iraq that poignantly shape the feelings, expectations, and memories of the Kurdish people currently living in Demirkap?. Each life trajectory, that we briefly describe, involves a strenuous effort to establish a relatively stable and enriching life under the precarious conditions of ongoing crises and authoritarian neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords: Migration Governance, Migration, Migrant Workers, refugees

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Introduction

With its more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees, Turkey is often hailed as the world's top refugee hosting country. Of all the cities in Turkey, Istanbul accommodates the largest number of Syrian refugees, close to 600,000. These numbers still only include "registered" refugees and do not count migrants from other countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.1 However, the large number of Syrian migrants does not simply translate to their public visibility and active participation in the political life of the city or the country. Located predominantly in low-income neighbourhoods of Istanbul, Syrian migrants are often excluded from the rest of Istanbul, which puts them in a specifically vulnerable position under the precarious conditions of authoritarian neoliberal capitalism and nationalist politics of security.

The civil society organisations, closely cooperating with the state, tend to reproduce the vulnerability and marginalisation of Syrian migrants. Embracing the language of humanitarianism or neo-

Ottomanism, which construes Syrian migrants as “guests,” these organisations and state agencies construct a hierarchical relationship with the migrants. In this relationship, the migrants mainly figure as victims in need of protection or saving or as mere recipients of “hospitality,” the special social services envisaged for them. In either way, the migrants are largely constructed as passive subjects, who are supposed to be only temporarily in Turkey and do not belong to the national polity.2 Thus, their lives, aspirations, and sentiments are not important considerations. Instead, important considerations are rather their sheer number, the statistical information collected by state agencies in order to “manage” them more efficiently and swiftly through top-down policies, and various projects of “integration,” assimilation, or deportation.

This paper critically engages with this type of refugee governance by offering insight into the daily struggles, aspirations, and longings of the Syrian migrants living in the inner-city neighbourhood of Demirkap?, Istanbul. This ethnographic focus on the urban daily life of Demirkap? harbours some surprises. When we started the research, we realized that Demirkap?, in fact, has brought together Kurdish migrants from Efrîn3 in northwest Syria, and Kurdish people from Bitlîs in Turkey’s Kurdistan, who had been forcefully displaced in the 1990s, as a result of the intensified war between the Turkish state and the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers’ Party). Our ethnographic focus gradually became centred on the “unexpected” encounter of these different Kurdish migrant groups, long divided by the sovereign territorial borders of the Turkish and Syrian nation-states. We realized that underneath the seemingly “recent” so-called refugee problem stood a long history of displacement and dispossession, experienced by the Kurdish people within and across various nation-state borders in the Middle East. After decades of separation by those borders, how did those Kurdish groups relate to each other in the specific urban space of Demirkap?? What were the challenges and possibilities of that encounter? How did the social differences and hierarchies of class, gender, and religion play out in their social relationships and daily lives? In what ways do the Turkish state and civil society organisations shape these relationships?

In exploring these questions, we first suggest unpacking monolithic categories such as “Syrian migrants,” which mask the social differences or inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity, and religion that divide the migrants and mark the social worlds which they inhabit in Turkey. Second, the paper critically evaluates dominant nation-state centred approaches to refugee or migration studies. Instead of taking the nation-state territorial border as given or natural, we think that it is crucial to focus on the historical social relations of power underlying it. In our study, we aim to problematize the nation-state territorial border by framing the Syrian Kurdish migrants’ experience within the long history and geography of Kurdistan. This is not to deny the importance of nation-state borders in dividing the people and shaping their identity. Instead, we want to understand how different kinds of borders, both material and symbolic, play out in the daily lives of the migrants. In doing so, we attend to similar critical approaches to refugee studies that focus on border practices.4 Finally, we suggest that the emplaced, ethnographic research is particularly promising to understand the daily lives of migrants and their experience of the multi-layered history of displacement and migration within and across borders. This history, we underscore, is not a past history, but one that unfolds in the present, within the current social hierarchies and in the midst of the ongoing crises in Syria and Iraq that poignantly shape the feelings, expectations, and memories of the Kurdish people currently living in Demirkap?.

The article consists of two major sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the histories of

migration and displacement, which intersect with each other in Demirkap?. It also outlines the fundamental features of the refugee governance led by the Turkish state authorities. The second half of the paper offers ethnographic insight into the lives of a few Kurdish migrants from Syria in Demirkap?. Through this focus, we show how two Kurdish groups, namely from Syria and from Turkey, relate to each other in the specific space of the neighbourhood and deal with the challenges they face in different spheres of life, especially in the informal labour and housing market. Social differences and hierarchies of class, gender, and ethnicity shape greatly the experiences of these groups, as they struggle to form solidarity relations and make a living. Each life trajectory that we briefly describe involves a strenuous effort to establish a relatively stable and enriching life under the precarious conditions of ongoing crisis and authoritarian neoliberal capitalism.

Istanbul as a Space of Overlapping Displacement of Kurds

Since the very beginning, the displacement of Kurds has shaped the history of forced migration in Turkey and the way in which state authorities govern it. Istanbul occupies a special place in this history. Although, since the 1960s, Turkey has been mainly regarded as an emigration country, particularly of labour migration to Europe,[5] the country has increasingly become “a regional hub for receiving continuous flows of forced migration”.[6] More recently, since 2011, Turkey has become a transit country for migrants heading to Europe, although, in practice, it has been functioning as an asylum country, mainly for refugees from Middle Eastern countries.[7] The first and only large-scale arrival or “mass influx” of refugees before the Syrian Civil War was that of the Kurdish refugees from today’s Kurdistan Region of Iraq between 1988 and 1991, which Kemal Kiri?çi suggests “amounted to almost half a million” registered refugees. Upon such incidences, Turkey developed the Asylum Regulations in 1994.[8] Turkey’s recent military incursion in the Kurdish regions of Northern Syria and Iraq has also shaped its migration governance by increasingly employing security measures and even waging a “war on irregular migration.”

The Kurdish people in Turkey have been subjected to systemic political violence, dispossession and impoverishment since at least the foundation of the Turkish Republic.[9] The situation of Kurds in Syria does not differ much. The post-French mandate history of Syria was characterized by anti-Kurdish state policies, which in 1962 reached the point of termination of citizenship rights of 120.000 Kurds living in the Jezîre region, on the pretext that their residency in the country since 1945 was not proven.[10]

While there were no instances of declared violence, the systemic impoverishment of Kurds led to (forced) migration – one of the most frequently used ways for states to dismantle “counterinsurgencies” in the region. This pattern can also be observed in the case of the Syrian Kurds, who were displaced to Syria’s larger cities.

Similarly, Turkish Kurds were forcibly displaced, due to the counter-insurgency war in the Kurdish provinces of Turkey. This resulted in the deprivation of their main livelihoods. In the early 1990s, during the war between the PKK and the Turkish army, many Kurdish people were forced to become “village guards” in their villages. Those who refused had no other option but to leave their war-torn villages and join the working-class in the metropolitan cities of Western Turkey, especially Istanbul. In the 1990s, approximately 4000 villages and smaller rural settlements were evacuated. While the official statistics indicate 370.000 displaced people, numbers given by independent humanitarian organisations vary

between one to four million people.[11] As such, Istanbul has always been a city of immigrants. Moreover, unlike the migration waves before the 1990s, these waves were less circular and more permanent migrations in nature.

All of the Turkish Bitlîsî interviewees in Demirkap? are from those villages, which until today are still subjected to armed conflicts. Starting as early as 2012, the displaced Kurds from Syria also "chose" to live in the predominantly Kurdish neighbourhoods of Istanbul such as Esenyurt, Küçükçekmece, and Ba?ak?ehir.[12] With the arrival of Syrian Kurdish refugees, Demirkap?, like these neighbourhoods, became one of the important urban spaces of "overlapping displacements," rooted in state violence and connecting different memories together.[13]

Turkey's Governance of Syrian Refugees

Despite the presence of a large number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, the public discussions on this issue are very limited. The great majority of people are considered mere spectators of state policies designed to manage the refugee population, which renders it extremely difficult to form reciprocal social bonds between Syrian migrants and the Turkish society at large. This section outlines some of the fundamental features of migration governance led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. This governance has specific effects on the living conditions of Kurdish people – Turkish citizens or not – in Demirkap?, as we describe in the next sections.

From the 1950s until 2013, the laws or regulations concerning migrants and refugees in Turkey were minimal. The state mainly concentrated on the surveillance of these groups through security institutions, but did not directly engage with any social provisions. After 2013, the AKP[14] government started to become more visibly and proactively involved. While establishing its control in the field through consolidating the authority of the Ministry of Interior, the government introduced "liberal" strategies on paper in the legal framework of governing the refugees. Although these strategies appeared to involve an increased presence in the field and they adopted more liberal policies of engagement with non-citizens residing in the country, in reality, there are major gaps between "policies as designed (outputs) and policies that actually impact the daily lives of individual migrants and refugees (outcomes)".[15]

This can be observed best in the participation of refugees in the labour market. While there is no restriction in obtaining a work permit, employers often choose not to issue work permits in order to make more profit, enjoying the little to no legal supervision on the ground. What is more, Syrian asylum seekers were taken under the status of "temporary protection" and their presence was regulated under the Law on Foreigners and International Protection.[16] The Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM)[17] was established and became the main actor. As of then, security institutions were no longer responsible for migration issues. As Dan?? and Nazl?[18] suggest, the government also formed "faithful alliances" with large non-governmental organisations and local municipalities that stayed loyal to its rules and nationalist religious politics of humanitarian aid. The oppositional or "unfaithful" civil society organisations and municipalities were marginalized and excluded from these alliances through restrictions imposed on their practice; a large number was even closed. The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and political developments in the Syrian Kurdish region offered fertile soil for authoritarian state practices and increased suppression of oppositional political and civil society actors. This was exacerbated by the urban warfare in Turkey's Kurdish provinces in 2015-2016, as well as the

failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016 and the state of emergency that followed.

However, “the smaller and less organized” civil society organisations still continued their “embedded and context-specific” activities to support Syrians. These include local initiatives and volunteering groups with small-scale finances, which enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. Their activities usually stay within a specific area (from city to district and even a neighborhood) and range from providing “needs based” and “rights based” social services to cultural activities.19 In general, however, the AKP government’s influence on refugee governance resulted in increasing political instrumentalisation and professionalisation in Turkish migration governance – and consequently, restricted the space in which civil society actors operate.

Moreover, the economic crisis has been worsening labour conditions and contributed to increased informalisation of the labour market. The Syrian migrants’ ambiguous legal position as “guests” (now under temporary protection) and the lack of government supervision over work permit issues have contributed to exploitative dynamics, as Syrian migrants constitute a “cheap source of labour”. With increased competition in the labour market, they have become an easy target of other marginalized and low income populations that constitute the urban poor in Turkey.20 In the next section, we will discuss how Syrian Kurds, together with Turkish Kurds, navigate the legal framework, as well as the peripheral urban space of Demirkap? and how it affects their livelihoods under challenging conditions of neoliberal conservative authoritarianism. In this respect, we will pay particular attention to the way in which they reflect on their past and present lives, as well as to the way in which gender and class dynamics shape our interlocutors’ differential experiences of vulnerability and (im)mobility in Istanbul.

Between Efrîn, Bitlîs, and Demirkap?: The Space and Memory of Displacement

In March of 2019, in a park named Ceviz Bahçesi (Walnut Garden) located in Demirkap?, a group of elderly Kurdish men wearing traditional caps and baggy trousers and playing checkers and backgammon in the roofed picnic tables of the park could be witnessed. They were displaced from the Turkish Bitlîs area due to the counter-insurgency war of the state in the 1990s. There were some other groups of men in the park sitting separately, yet speaking Kurmancî with some discernible local differences. They were elders of another displaced Kurdish community, this time from the Syrian Efrîn or Kurd Dagh region. In general, it was hard to meet Syrian women in the public spaces of the neighbourhood. The first woman, whom we had a conversation with, was Meta Cevrîye,21 a 55-year-old woman of six children, who has been living in Demirkap? since she left her village in Efrîn almost six years ago. As we understood from her narrative, Ceviz Bahçesi occupies a special place in her emplacement process. At some point during our conversation, observing her uneasiness about being in Turkey, we asked whether living in Istanbul had gotten any better since she came to Istanbul six year ago. She explained:

When I first came here, it was hard at the beginning, really hard. Exile *(xerîbî)*22 is tough. There is nothing like *xerîbî*. If it had not been dangerous and shameful, I would have returned [to Syria] right away. I could not bear it here. I used to sit in the park *(Ceviz Bahçesi)* every day from early mornings to late evenings. I could not stay at home. I could not bear being indoors. This lasted for a year. In the park, I could breathe a bit. I saw people sitting and walking around. It was green. If I saw someone from Efrîn or [other parts of] Syria, ohh, my heart would beat fast. We would sit together, have a chat, and

relax a bit.

We quoted this conversation in detail to highlight the way in which the material space, specifically the park, shapes the experiences of displacement and emplacement of our Syrian Kurdish interlocutors. This material space is not just a setting or container of social relations, but constitutes them by evoking memories, connecting people, and orienting their sense of the world. Efrînîs, like other displaced people, form “multiplicity of attachments to places through living in, remembering and imagining them.”[23]

This conversation with Meta Cevrîye took place in the hair salon that Cennet and her husband Weysî started to run recently. This salon turned out to be another important location for the research, as it brought together a number of people whom we could not have had the chance to meet otherwise. By paying attention to the casual conversations among the visitors of the salon, we could observe how Efrînî migrants shared their memories of what they had gone through; how they expressed their feelings of loss, longings for Efrîn, and daily challenges of living in Istanbul. Due to the dire economic conditions and state surveillance, many Efrînîs were entrapped in the neighbourhood, which brought particular intensity to their memories of homeland and displacement. These memories mediated the way in which they talked about their current challenges, especially economic hardships caused by the unfolding economic crisis. In order to pay arbitrarily rising rent prices and increasing bills of basic amenities, they have to spend considerable time and effort under informal and particularly exploitative conditions, notably in textile and construction sectors.

Almost all interlocutors indicated that the search for a better *ma’i?et*[24] (meaning livelihood in Arabic) was their primary motivation to leave Syria. As such, our interlocutors did not dismiss the Civil War as the primary cause of their displacement. However, their experience of the war, just like that of displacement, can be characterised as multi-layered. As Gmelsch *et al.*[25] suggested, even “in extreme cases of hardship such as famine and war,” migration is not “motivated by a single factor. [...] Migration must be viewed as a process in which individuals consciously change their own situation in search of a more rewarding life.” In this respect, both the pre-war migratory patterns of Efrînîs, as well as Efrîn’s state from the Civil War until the incursion of Turkey in 2018 exemplify how migrants or refugees might have multi-layered motivations to move from where they live. Impoverished systematically, Efrînîs had been earning their lives in the larger cities of Syria, mostly in Aleppo. As for the period of the Civil War, the Kurdish regions in Syria are generally considered ‘relatively’ stable. The Efrîn region specifically, unlike Kobanê and Jezîre, had not been targeted by ISIS or other armed Islamist or pro-Syrian regime groups. As such, the region received a massive number of IDPs from other conflicted areas, notably Aleppo. As a result, Efrînîs had started to leave Syria well before Efrîn became a zone of armed conflict.

In this sense, Cennet and Weysî’s migratory pasts are similar, as are the displacement stories of many Efrînîs. Originally from Efrîn, Cennet and Weysî used to live in Aleppo until the clashes erupted in the city. Back in Aleppo, Weysî worked as a tailor for at least ten years, while Cennet used to run a hairdressing salon. Weysî managed the financial and bureaucratic tasks of the salon behind the scenes, whereas Cennet and her sister would run the salon. Considering the unequal gender relations in the neighbourhood, Weysî’s major task was to make this women-run enterprise socially acceptable. The Syrian Kurds who were interviewed often indicated that the war and displacement brought about

some freedom and empowerment for women, who traditionally did not join economic activities out of domestic spheres before the war. Yet, this “empowerment” of women in the non-domestic economic spheres, usually happens in adverse conditions, as Syrian refugee women and children constitute an even easier source of cheap labour to be exploited in the informal workplaces. Cennet, therefore, was relatively successful in her salon business. Yet, in a country where the work permit system for refugees does not function well, many women did not have such a chance of starting their own business.

Cennet and Weysî both highlighted the generous welcome they received from Demirkap? residents when they first arrived in the neighbourhood. However, they also sorrowfully noted how their relations with the local Kurdish residents later changed. Everyone, including Syrian migrants and Demirkap? residents, initially thought that the settlement of Syrian Kurdish migrants would be short-term. Cennet and Weysî thought the same. However, at the time of doing fieldwork, it was already their seventh year in the neighbourhood.

The desire to return was indeed widely shared among the Efrînî migrants. That is partly why some have decided to remain in Turkey or Kurdistan Regional Government instead of migrating to Europe. From time to time, during Islamic holidays, for instance, they would visit their homeland, Efrîn. They would travel back either with official permits or through the help of smugglers. However, when the Turkish military started the “Olive Branch Operation” in early 2018,[26] these visits became almost impossible for Efrînîs. Not only did they become too dangerous, but smuggling also became increasingly expensive. Efrînîs’ hope for return shattered, as the distance between their homelands appeared greater than ever. As such, the families became further fragmented and dispersed.

For different reasons, the Efrînîs who remained in Syria were mostly elder parents. The majority of them could not bear the emotional burden of leaving home, and others could not take the dangerous journeys that required physical strength. Cennet underlined a few times that it has been over six years since she has seen her parents. Weysî explained his 55-year-old mother passed away of “qahr” (great sorrow), witnessing the Turkish military incursion and being forcibly displaced. He also argued to believe these sorrows had fatal consequences for many elderly Efrînîs. Many of the Efrînîs in Turkey lost their hopes to return to Syria. They feel stuck in Turkey, and therefore left for Europe, often through dangerous sea journeys, given that chances of formal resettlement are extremely limited. As a result, the Turkish state had become the actor that exacerbated their displacement. The Turkish state was an important part of their displacement and the reason that delayed their return. Moreover, the Syrian migrants had to shoulder the burden of the impending economic crisis that diminished their employment and housing options.

Kurdish Solidarity Relations under Precarious Conditions

On another day of field research in Ceviz Bahçesi park, it was, as usual, filled with elderly Efrînî and Bitlîsî men playing chess and checkers on the picnic tables. There, Apê Heme, a 52-year-old man, who had been living in Demirkap? for the last six years, explained to earn his livelihood in Damascus until the war broke out. Not being able to settle down anywhere in Efrîn which was overwhelmed by the internally displaced people, he came to Demirkap?, which he already knew to be predominantly Kurdish, given his preference to live among people who spoke Kurdish and experiencing similar forms of anti-Kurdish oppression. Moreover, he expected to find some Kurdish solidarity networks in the

neighbourhood for job and housing possibilities. Although he did get assistance from such networks it remained limited. Against many expectations, Syrian presence in Turkey became protracted. In addition, the increasing criminalisation of Kurdish groups in Turkey since 2015, which marked the end of the peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdish political movement adversely affected Kurdish solidarity networks. Moreover, recent military incursion in Northern Syria further deepened senses of isolation and fear in terms of publicly identifying oneself as a Kurd – let alone of forming solidarity alliances through Kurdishness. Lastly, many Kurdish networks in Turkey were shut down, causing them to lose resources and capacity for solidarity action, but rather being in need of support themselves.

In the midst of economic hardships and increasing social and political precarity in Demirkap?, Syrian Kurdish interviewees indicated to feel atomized and isolated. They compete with Turkish Kurds and other underprivileged people over scarce resources, such as housing and employment, and also over poor welfare services such as health and education. In addition, Apê Heme was crystal clear about the lack of support he received in the face of difficulties in finding a job, as he said, “We did not and we do not want anything from the people of Turkey. We are human beings, we are strong.” However, finding a job proved nearly impossible, especially as a middle-aged Syrian migrant. Although he used to work as a mechanic in Damascus, there seemed to be no need for him in Demirkap?, as employers preferred to illegally employ Syrian migrants’ children, who constitute an even cheaper and more exploitable labour force than adult women and men. Similarly, young migrant women were employed in the informal labour market, being considered ‘vulnerable,’ ‘disposable,’ and therefore cheap labour. By neglecting the supervision over the functioning of work permits for migrants, the AKP government abandoned Syrian migrants to the vagaries of the informal, flexible labour market.

Notwithstanding these hardships and life between super-exploitation and abandonment by capital, Syrian migrants additionally have been facing rising anti-immigrant sentiments, fueled by narratives of Syrians undeservedly depleting scarce public resources, and as job competitors to local subaltern and working-class people. In the midst of all this perilous scapegoating of refugees, and increasing precarious living and working conditions, people like Apê Heme struggle to maintain their life by finding temporary jobs. Solidarity relations between Kurdish people appeared to be difficult to develop and sustain under those conditions.

Certainly, not every Kurdish migrant from Syria faced this challenge of economically dire conditions in a similar manner, which, for example, was the case for ?emam, a 22-year-old woman, living with her family in Bayramtepe neighbourhood of Ba?ak?ehir, not far from Demirkap?. Similar to Demirkap?, Ba?ak?ehir is a low-income neighbourhood, predominantly populated by Syrian Kurds and Turkish Kurds. It had been seven years since she and her family left Aleppo. Her family was among the few Efrînî families, which could afford the material expenses of building a new life by themselves, that is, to rent a liveable house and afford the basic amenities. Furthermore, ?emam’s brother owning a textile workshop enabled the family to accumulate capital.

Similar to Cennet, ?emam managed to become relatively “successful” in economic life in Turkey. When the clashes broke out in Aleppo in 2012, the rest of the family travelled through the border gate to join ?emam’s brother, who arrived three months earlier. ?emam, unlike most Efrînîs of her age – who were mostly young and single males– was well supported by her family. This shaped her whole trajectory of

migration. With the support of her family, she finished the last year of high school in Turkey. Later, she took private Turkish and English language courses. Her fluency in Kurdish, Arabic, English and Turkish, allowed her to start working in the last three years as a part time interpreter and translator in two different leading international NGOs in the field of migration. In parallel, she studied food engineering at a private university in Istanbul. Aware of the general hardships and challenges faced by her Efrînî fellows, she acknowledged her privilege of having a family to support her emotionally and financially.

When asked about her initial experiences of migration in Turkey, ?emam offered a straightforward and year-by-year short narrative in Kurdish: “In the first year when I came to Turkey, I sank into depression (‘depresyona girdim’).” She elaborated:

I did not witness much of the Syrian Civil War, no blood and things. But I was displaced from my city, left my friends. Most significantly, I left my school. I did not know the language [herein Turkey]. I saw people laughing and talking with each other and getting around all the time, everywhere. [But having fled] you do not know any of them. This is why I suffered from depression. But the major reason was school. I was fond of my studies. Then, when I had to leave, I was left with nothing. When I was overwhelmed, I used to talk to my mom. We used to go out together. The few friends I had in Turkey were not like minded, even though most of them were Kurds of Istanbul. They were working anyways. Many of them would say, ‘You Syrians, you came here to destroy our country too.’ And things like that.

Through her years of long education and language acquisition ?emam struggled hard – despite her relatively privileged position in comparison to other Syrian Kurdish migrants – to make a living. As she puts it succinctly, she had to make something out of herself:

Over time you reach a point and say, ‘I am going to stay here for quite a while with these people. I have to make something out of myself. What am I here?’ [...] You have to show them that you are a hard worker, so that they can understand you are a human being, and that you are not just a Syrian who fled from some war. You are also someone who is a hard-worker.

It was an active attitude: nothing could be taken for granted. ?emam’s switches in languages during the conversation were revealing. She has been struggling to remake her life in Istanbul. It is in a sense a struggle of reclaiming the “normality” of life that was eroded by the forced displacement and dire conditions of refuge in Istanbul.

Conclusion

All the life experiences, briefly discussed here, offer insight into the different ways Syrian Kurdish migrants struggle to reshape life trajectories, which has been largely confined to the situations they are usually portrayed in, that is the condition of being the victim of an ongoing Civil War and to the temporariness and exceptionality of being a refugee in Turkey. ?emam’s first year in Istanbul, just like that of Meta Cevrîye, was marked by the exhaustion of displacement and depression. While Meta Cevrîye could endure that by spending time in Ceviz Bahçesi with her fellow Efrînîs, ?emam relied on her family and “hard work,” as she put it. Recently, ?emam was accepted for resettlement by a European country. With her education background, language skills, and young age, she is among the

small minority of “fortunate” Syrian Kurdish refugees. Meta Cevrîye, on the other hand, despite the life she built anew over the years in Istanbul, counts as an “irregular migrant,” as she does not have the required documentation. As such, she is among the hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds waiting for an indefinite future that is subjected to the whims and interests of international politics, refugee governance, and proxy wars in Syria. Facing an indefinite future under the increasingly restricting policies, Cennet had to close down her hair salon recently. Now that Efrîn seems more distant than ever under the de facto Turkish control, Apê Heme, kept his hope of return to a distant and unknown future.

The different life trajectories of Syrian Kurds in Istanbul shed light on the way they experience the social differences and hierarchies of class, gender, and ethnicity in the low-income neighbourhood of Istanbul. Migration experiences thus reveal crucial insights about the structures of power that play out at different levels in our interlocutors’ lives. They point to border practices that are essential to the making of the state and capitalism. These borders concern not only the territorial sovereign nation-state borders, but also the material and symbolic borders of class, race, and gender. Many groups, Turkish citizens or not, face such dynamics, but because of their legal status, migrants are particularly vulnerable to different marginalisations and exclusions by border practices. The ongoing Civil War in Syria ironically brought Kurdish people together in Istanbul after long years of separation by wars and nation-state borders. In Demirkap?, different Kurdish groups had the chance to interact and live more closely. However, our study shows that forming solidarity relations between them is not at all a straightforward process. It is full of tensions, dilemmas, and challenges that arise out of the precarious political and economic conditions, the social hierarchies of class, gender, and ethnicity, which mark the histories and present-day living conditions of Kurdish people. It should, however, be noted, that the Turkish state and pro-government civil society organisations contribute remarkably to the migrants’ marginality, invisibility, and vulnerability due to the ambiguous legal strategies and security measures they have employed, and the hierarchical relations they have established with the migrants.

Our ethnographic study partly aimed to show that the Syrian migrants are not just passive recipients of aid or public services, provided by the state institutions and pro-government civil society organisations, but are also active agents who try to make their living. They are not mere consumers of these services, but also contribute to the urban social life. Any progressive social engagement with the migrants, we suggest, needs to work towards building the conditions for a flourishing common life of citizens and non-citizens.

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- 1. Didem Dan?? and Dilara Nazl?, “A Faithful Alliance Between the Civil Society and the State: Actors and Mechanisms of Accommodating Syrian Refugees in Istanbul,” *International Migration* , 2018, Vol. 57(2), p. 143-157.
- 2. *Ibid.*
- 3. Efrîn region is one of the three main Kurdish enclaves in Syria together with Kobanê and Jezîre. It is historically known as Kurd Dagh (Kurdish Mountain), a name from Ottoman times. Çiyayê Kurmênc is its literal Kurdish translation and how Efrînîs widely call it. Efrîn is the main town in the region which is composed of 360-366 villages. Throughout, we employ the Kurdish names the research participants use for those places. Similarly, we use the Kurdish suffix “-î” at the end of the cities (e.g.: Efrînî, Bitlîsî) to denote the residency and origin of people in and to that city.
- 4. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2013; Prem Kumar Rajam, “Refugees as Surplus Population: Race, Migration and Capitalist Value Regimes,” *New Political Economy*, 2018, Vol. 23(5), p. 627-639.
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- 6. Nergis Canefe, “Management of irregular migration: Syrians in Turkey as paradigm shifters for forced migration studies,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 2016, Vol. 54, p. 9–32.
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- 8. Kemal Kiri?çi, *op.cit.*, 2007,p. 95.
- 9. Onur Günay, “In war and peace: Shifting narratives of violence in Kurdish Istanbul,” *American Anthropologist*, 2019, Vol.121, p. 554-567; Veli Yad?rg?, *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- 10. Seda Altu?, *“Sectarianism in the Syrian Jazira: Community, land and violence in the memories of World War I and the French Mandate (1915-1939),”* Unpublished doctoral thesis, Utrecht, Utrecht University, 2011.
- 11. Onur Günay, *op.cit.*, 2019.
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- 13. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “Refugee-refugee relations in contexts of overlapping displacement,” Website, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2016, available at: https://www.ijurr.org/spotlight-on/the-urban-refugee-crisis-reflections-... [last accessed 3 August 2019].
- 14. AKP (Adalet ve Kalk?nma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) is a political party ruling Turkey since 2002. Founded as a “conservative democratic party”, it has increasingly gained an authoritarian character under the unquestionable central leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdo?an. The government’s authoritarian practices have significantly been rising especially since 2013 after the violent suppression of Gezi Park demonstrations.
- 15. Kelsey P. Norman, “Inclusion, exclusion or indifference? Redefining migrant and refugee host state engagement options in Mediterranean ‘transit’ countries,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2019, Vol. 45(1), p.42-60.
- 16. Ahmet ?çduygu and Damla B. Aksel, “Migration Realities and State Responses: Rethinking International Migration Policies in Turkey,” In Stephen Castles, Dinem Ozkul, and Ana M. Cubas Alvariño (eds.), *Social Transformation and Migration*, 2015, p. 115–131.
- 17. “Göç ?daresi” in Turkish as widely known among the migrants. Its countrywide organisation dates back only to 2013 subsequent to the mass arrival of the Syrian refugees.
- 18. Didem Dan?? and Dilara Nazl?, *op.cit.*, 2018.
- 19. Helen Mackreath and ?evin Gülfer Sa?n?ç, “Civil Society and Syrian Refugees in Turkey,” Ka??thane, *Citizens' Assembly Turkey*, 2017, available at: https://www.hyd.org.tr/attachments/article/215/civil-society-and-syrian-... [last accessed 3 October 2017].
- 20. Didem Dan?? and Dilara Nazl?, *op.cit.*, 2018; Eder Mine and Derya Özkul, “Editors’ introduction: precarious lives and Syrian refugees in Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 2016, Vol. 54, p. 1–8.
- 21. All names of the interlocutors are pseudonyms in order to avoid retrospective identification. Throughout the text, we use the terms of kinship before some names –especially for the names of elderlies. These terms were used in the interviews, as a moral code of showing respect. *Ap-ê* means paternal uncle in Kurdish, *met-a* means paternal aunt.
- 22. ‘X’ in Kurdish corresponds to the sound “kh” in English.
- 23. Hariz Halilovich, *Places of pain: forced displacement, popular memory and trans-local identities in Bosnian War-torn communities*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2007.
- 24. *Ma’i?et* has been one of the most frequently used words by Efrînîs in the interviews.
- 25. George Gmelch, Robert V. Kemper and Walter P. Zenner, *Urban life*, Long Grove, Waveland Press Inc, 2010.
- 26. According to a recent report by a civil society organisation called IMPACT- Civil Society Research and Development (previously known as Citizens for Syria): “(…) the situation in Afrin district, which came under de facto Turkish control after operation “Olive Branch” (January-March 2018), is characterized by high levels of instability. There, the displacement of local residents and the resettlement of IDPs have exacerbated pre-existing ethnic tensions. The situation is characterized by high discrepancies between local residents and IDPs in terms of access to personal security, livelihood, freedom of movement and the ability to practice one’s own traditions. Local residents in Afrin district have also been the victims of serious human rights violations and discriminatory practices imposed by armed opposition groups (AOGs), who are also seen as giving privileges to IDPs with connections to AOGs.” See: IMPACT- Civil