

Faith-Based Actors in ?anl?urfa, Turkey: Reducing Tensions Between Host Populations and Syrian Refugee Communities

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Abstract

Preventing possible tensions between refugees and the host population has become a policy priority for countries hosting large numbers of refugees. In addition to local, national and international humanitarian actors, faith-based actors from both host and refugee communities attempt to prevent any tension, as it may disrupt public order, migrant integration and social cohesion. However, little is known about the mechanisms and strategies used by refugee-led faith-based actors to take a role in reducing tensions between host-community and refugees. This article examines refugee-organised faith-based actors' capabilities, limits and interactions with host city actors in conflict prevention, by drawing from the case of ?anl?urfa, a Turkish border province which hosts half a million Syrian refugees. Based on ethnographic field research, including interviews and participant observation, as well as the analysis of local media outlets, the paper focuses on the engagements of faith-based actors of Syrian refugee community with the local actors of ?anl?urfa. Findings illustrate that faith-based actors are able to prevent escalation of social tensions in early stages when they coordinate and cooperate with local political and humanitarian actors. However, their effectiveness in preventing tensions in later stages remains limited and does not fully eliminate the risk of violence, as such tensions are often underpinned by socio-economic factors. Finally, the case shows that faith-based actors' engagement in refugee-host community relations lead to small but significant contributions that come with risks and challenges.

Keywords: refugees, faith-based actors, Turkey, Syrians, conflict prevention

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Introduction

Preventing conflict between refugees and host populations is a pressing policy issue in refugee host countries. Each country witnesses complex interactions between actors using varying strategies and resource capabilities to prevent potential conflict. Host state authorities often implement immediate security measures, while local associations and international non-governmental organisations focus on conflict prevention by adopting small-scale social cohesion projects. Faith-based actors from both host and refugee communities are often also involved in conflict prevention.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) underlines the importance of partnering with faith-based actors – grouped under three types: faith-based organisations, local faith communities and faith leaders.¹ Faith-based organisations encompass religious and religion-based organisations or networks, communities belonging to a place of religious worship, specialized religious institutions and religious social service agencies, and registered or unregistered non-profit institutions that have a religious character or mission.”² Local faith communities are not organised, rather, they are composed of people who share common religious beliefs and values. Local faith communities mobilize and provide support through their membership and faith networks, often voluntarily, considering it a tenet of their faith to do so in humanitarian emergencies. Though, they do not necessarily act by referring to humanitarian principles. Faith leaders, drawing power from trust and moral authority over members of their local faith community, are those “who play influential roles within their faith communities and the broader local community.” They shape public opinion in the broader community.³ It is worth noting that “a refugee who regularly attends a church or mosque does not necessarily identify themselves with the label ‘local faith community member,’ as current humanitarian language tends to capture them.”⁴

When responding to humanitarian crises and providing relief and assistance to vulnerable people,⁵ faith-based actors sometimes have advantages over secular organisations. These derive from their ability to respond faster through social networks, mobilisation experience and financial capital. Further, their religious affiliations may create affinity with the affected communities.

However, there are also concerns about the neutrality and objectivity of these actors as well as donor expectations, as they often fail to comply with international humanitarian standards.⁶ For example, Gulf-funded humanitarian organisations providing aid to Syrian refugees in Lebanon often make “ad hoc deliveries with few administrative procedures and lack of transparency.”⁷ Despite this, acknowledging that their advantages outweigh their disadvantages, the UNHCR cooperates with some faith-based actors in forced migration responses, particularly in the global South.⁸

Faith-based actors occupy a range of roles dealing with population displacement, mainly centred around provision of basic needs and protection. These actors operate with diverse motives, donors and actor networks. Faith-based actors can also originate from within refugee communities that self-organise after displacement.⁹ Self-organised faith-based refugee groups share similar characteristics with other faith-based humanitarian actors, although they may have less resources and capacities. In refugee protection, faith-based actors present some benefits, such as providing shelter in places of worship, assisting individual vulnerable cases, and ensuring access to healthcare and employment through their networks, and even accompanying detainees.¹⁰

Moreover, these actors engage in community outreach and advocacy. They conduct activities supporting social cohesion between refugees and host communities. They contribute to mediating tension between refugees – or internally displaced persons – and host communities through reconciliation and peace-building activities that combat xenophobia and discrimination.¹¹ Due to their capacity to promote social cohesion, host countries, national actors and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) may work with faith-based actors.

However, the implications of cooperation with faith-based actors have not been adequately addressed in existing literature, providing only incomplete analysis on faith-based actor’s roles in reducing tension.

This paper addresses this gap by exploring recent examples of faith-based actors involved in conflict prevention. The focus of the study is Şanlıurfa, a Turkish border province which hosts almost half a million of Turkey's current total of 3.6 million Syrian refugees.¹² This paper explores the mechanisms and strategies used by faith-based actors to reduce tensions in Şanlıurfa, with reference also to Gaziantep. Further, this paper focuses on faith-based actors' interactions with host city actors and assesses the limits of refugee-organised faith-based organisations' capacities.

The research uses qualitative research methods, consisting of 45 semi-structured interviews conducted throughout 2018 with Syrian refugees, provincial Turkish authorities, and representatives from both international and national humanitarian organisations operating in Şanlıurfa.¹³ Additionally, field observations, informal conversations with host community members, researchers and native volunteers serving the refugee community, as well as discourse analysis of local and national news helped to inform this paper.

The paper argues that faith-based actors are able to prevent escalation of social tensions in early stages, when they coordinate and cooperate with local political and humanitarian actors. However, their effectiveness in preventing tensions in later stages remains limited and does not fully eliminate the risk of violence, as these tensions are often underpinned by socio-economic factors.

Şanlıurfa: from Quiet Host to a Tense Community

Since 2011, Şanlıurfa, a Turkish province bordering Syria, has become a transit and settlement location for Syrian refugees. At the time of writing (April 2019), Şanlıurfa hosted Turkey's second largest Syrian population at 451,434 – 22% of the province's population of 2,035,089.¹⁴ Şanlıurfa is also one of the ten poorest provinces in Turkey, where average family income is approximately half of the Turkish average.¹⁵ The province has limited job opportunities, is largely un-industrialised and relies on an agricultural economy. Seasonal agricultural jobs are the primary economic activity of many locals. Many rely on secondary income from construction, service sectors, state social security, and NGOs. The geographic proximity, ethnic and social dynamics of Şanlıurfa are significant factors in why nearly half a million Syrian refugees remain in the province.

Şanlıurfa occupies 250 km of Turkey's 911 km Syrian border and many Turkish citizens live within 100 km of the border. The provincial capital is 55 km away from the border and there are official border crossings in three different towns, namely Akcakale, Mursitpinar, and Ceylanpinar. These remained relatively open to Syrians until 2014, with intermittent closures following Turkish security concerns. Turks and Syrians in this area are also culturally, ethnically and linguistically close. Half of Şanlıurfa's Turkish population speak Arabic and Kurdish, in addition to Turkish, and there are many kinship ties between Syrians and Turks in the area.¹⁶

The Turkey-Syria border can be defined as a "geopolitical" and "national border" in William Walter's categorisation. This means that it is a border marking both the limit of state control over territory, and the limit of the state's ability to homogenise national identity. Despite efforts since the early 20th century,¹⁷ the borderlands in the southeast of Turkey and northern Syria have not been fully homogenised with the rest of their respective nation states due to the continuation of cross-border cultures after the demarcation of national borders. Cross-border social and economic relations have

continued in different forms from marriages to trade and smuggling, and even daily visits as border regulations have allowed.

In the words of sociologist Mahmut Kaya, “although a border is a physical fixed durable entity,”¹⁸ this border has never been accepted in the sociological imagination of local people who consistently say that “these political borders were artificially and forcibly drawn by nation-states on the territories of the Ottoman Empire, divided families and tribes, while the same border communities continued their relations in various forms.”¹⁹ These ethnic, linguistic, religious, kinship, and tribal ties between locals and Syrians initially provided welcoming attitudes to refugee arrivals. Community leaders drew on social capital to self-initiate mediation when problems arose.

Tensions Emerge Between Host Communities and Syrian Refugees

Şanlıurfa is one of the most highly concentrated Syrian-hosting provinces after Istanbul.²⁰ According to media reports, fieldwork observations and interviews with key informants, the overall experience has been relatively peaceful between Syrian refugees and locals – compared to neighbouring province, Gaziantep – without major violent episodes until 2018. It should be noted that, in general, Turkey has witnessed only occasional outbreaks of tension with Syrians, with few incidents of heavy violence.²¹ In May 2015, a protest marching under the banner of “We do not want Syrians” was planned by locals in Şanlıurfa. However, the provincial government did not allow it, and even arrested those disseminating similar slogans through social media.²² Despite government warnings, some locals still went to protest. However, many were immediately detained by security forces.²³

Tension escalated into violence between locals and Syrian refugees in October 2018. The trigger was the murder of two Turkish brothers, and the wounding of another two, by Syrians.²⁴ Social media news of the event spread rapidly and hundreds of locals (*Urfalılar*) gathered in front of the municipal town hall. The angry crowd mobilized to terrify Syrians and attacked some, chanting “We do not want Syrians.” Many Syrian stores were stoned and heavily damaged.²⁵ Security forces intervened to stop protestors attacking Syrians and arrested eight Syrians allegedly involved in the fighting and the murders, while detaining over 20 Turks who disseminated provocative messages on social media. They also placed extra security measures in neighbourhoods where Syrians lived in large numbers. Calming down the protestors took nearly a week,²⁶ and many Syrians were afraid to leave their houses or open their stores for days.²⁷

Several months before the incident, during fieldwork, escalating tension was tangible through the anti-Syrian discourse among locals, including the key authorities such as *muhtars*,²⁸ public bureaucrats, and directors of line ministries’s provincial branches, e.g. Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Policies, and Ministry of Health. In communication with locals, often the first topic on the table was the high number of Syrians in the province and narratives around Syrian “wrongdoings.” Anti-Syrian statements included “Syrians are taking our jobs,” “They use the public buses freely,” “There is no space for us in the public parks, because all are filled by them,” and “Syrians do not behave properly as guests.”

Some statements were highly gendered such as “Syrian men are shameless, they sit in front of their houses and smoke water pipes,” “Syrian women wear a lot of make-up, spend all of their money on

coiffeur and cosmetics, they marry with our local men, often as a second wife.” Other negative statements contained prejudices, and discrimination.²⁹ I saw a restaurant in the main market with a sign saying “This store is not a Syrian store, it is *Urfal*?” protesting that Syrians opened their own stores on this shopping street. Along with other statements, this signalled that sharing economic resources had become a point of tension between the host and refugee communities.

As Seno?uz notes “reactions among the local population at the border have been shaped and turned into struggles over the definition and meaning of society – over the question of who belongs and who does not.”³⁰ According to the people of ?anl?urfa, Syrians do not belong to the city, thus they should not be too visible in urban space. Syrians’ “intense” usage of parks, pavements, public buses and markets made the host community concerned about the perceived changing ownership of the city.

Many interviewed Syrians were aware of increasing anti-Syrian sentiments. They recalled incidents of discrimination and assault experienced in public buses, work places, and neighbourhoods. However, none reported physical violence by locals against Syrians until June 2018. Gradually, anti-Syrian attitudes in the city became more widespread and violent, leading to multiple deaths of Syrians in the city.

As mentioned earlier, the level of communal conflict remained relatively low until 2018,³¹ unlike the neighbouring province of Gaziantep, which hosts less Syrians. It experienced violent riots on August 11, 2014, after the alleged murder of a Turkish landlord by his Syrian tenant. Syrians were lynched and their shops, cars and houses were vandalized by Turkish locals.³² Anti-Syrian riots occurred on July 15, 2016 in Ankara’s Önder neighbourhood, where more than 40,000 Syrians live, and houses and businesses of Syrians were damaged.³³

In addition, there are no legal deterrents imposed by state authorities. It is not yet fully understood which actors, factors, and mechanisms played roles in preventing the escalation of violence in ?anl?urfa, before the end of 2018.

Syrian Refugee Organisations and Relations with Local Actors

Formal and informal organisations established by Syrians have flourished in ?anl?urfa since 2012. Although there are no firm numbers about such organisations due to a lack of registration, experts from ?anl?urfa estimate there are between 100 and 150 civil society organisations established by Syrians in the province, almost half of which are faith-based. Legally, only Syrians who have a residence permit are allowed to establish, and become members of, registered associations.

Thus, many organisations do not register because most Syrians are neither holders of Turkish passports nor of residence permits, and some even lack temporary protection status.³⁴ The organisations which are legally registered are often established in partnership with Turks and Syrians who are in possession of a passport or who have obtained Turkish citizenship. The founders of these organisations are usually highly educated Syrians with political, economic, and social capital.

Refugee-created organisations carry out several services, and their functions are shaped by Syrians’

needs. Their primary service areas include education, vocational training, providing socio-psychological support, and caring notably for orphans and people with disabilities. For example, the Rakkaevi Association accommodated thousands of newly arrived Syrians between 2013 and 2015, while the Yasmin Sham Association supports disabled Syrians.³⁵ Some cultural centres such as Nofara Syria Cultural Centre serve as both shelters and platforms for organising panels, seminars, celebrations, conferences, and theatre activities.³⁶ In recent years, due to increasing needs and funding conditionality, newly established Syrian organisations focused on employment and integration-related activities. For example, the Usume bin Zeyd Cultural Center – established in 2017 with the financial support of Kuwaiti businessmen³⁷ – provides vocational training to Syrians.³⁸ Organisations and businessmen from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, particularly those from Qatar and Kuwait also distribute cash and aid in-kind to Syrian refugees through Quranic courses and local faith associations. Funding from Gulf countries is also used to finance educational facilities for Syrians. However, none of the Syrian associations interviewed indicated Gulf countries as their sponsors. In Turkey, as in Lebanon, “these organisations function largely outside the United Nations’ response and rely on their own coordination structures,” nevertheless they coordinate with some state agencies.³⁹

Some Syrian associations mediate between the Turkish state and Syrian communities, helping Syrians access public services such as civil registration, schooling, and making business investments. Beside their philanthropic priorities, some, such as Insan Foundation, organise activities for raising awareness about Syrian rights in Turkey. Local rights-based NGOs often collaborate with international NGOs.⁴⁰ There are also some Syrian NGOs organising cultural activities, religious courses, and publishing in Arabic to maintain refugees’ Syrian identity.⁴¹ Such organisations also serve as community platforms for mediating problems between Syrians, including intra-family problems and divorce cases.⁴² While some are self-funded or receive grants from INGOs, international remittances from Syrians in Europe or Arab Gulf countries also finance such associations and cultural centres.⁴³ Some of these actors among the Syrian refugee community are faith-based actors from Syria. Social recognition of religious leaders persists after community disruption. In ?anl?urfa, substantial numbers of Syrian religious figures⁴⁴ run *madrasas* (schools) – often with orphanages or dormitories – which are mainly attended by Syrians. It is estimated that there are around 20 courses, with no precise figures on participant numbers. Course organisers and religious teachers serve as community leaders and have regular audiences participating in activities.⁴⁵ With regular courses and interaction, they shape public opinion of sections of the Syrian refugee community in ?anl?urfa.

Moreover, these community-based faith leaders often seek to create specialized religious institutions and religious social service agencies. Unlike the associations mentioned above, they are “unregistered non-profit institutions that have a religious character and mission.”⁴⁶ In ?anl?urfa, in 2014, a number of Syrian religious scholars created an informal assembly called the “?anl?urfa Sharia Assembly” (*Suriyeli Alimler Birli?i*). They aimed to solve the problems of Syrian refugees in civil issues such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, which marked early signs of religious legal pluralism for Syrians in Turkey. This was necessary given that many Syrians lack legal refugee status in Turkey and are unable to apply to Turkish courts for family-related issues. The members of the Assembly also issue fatawa (Islamic rulings) when needed and reconcile conflicting parties.

Relations Between Host Community Actors and Refugee-Created Faith-Based Actors

In Gaziantep, provincial state authorities have taken a flexible approach to the activities of formal and informal faith-based Syrian actors. However, they do not directly cooperate due to concerns about their legality. That is, although Syrian stakeholders often have legal status, their collectives – such as Quranic courses, *masjids* (praying places) or associations – often remain unregistered with state authorities. Instead, local NGOs which work closely with provincial state authorities build direct relations with Syrian NGOs. Thus, Turkish local NGOs became able to coordinate activities with Syrian faith-based organisations on behalf of state authorities. For example, national organisations such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) and *Insani Yardım Platformu*⁴⁷ – an umbrella forum bringing together 183 local NGOs – operate in Gaziantep. The same local NGOs are also supported by provincial and municipal governments. In fact, actors in those local NGOs, provincial and municipal governments are often from similar networks. They know each other well and worked together before the Syrian crisis. The forum coordinates the interactions of some formal and informal Syrian organisations with the provincial and municipal governments.

Thus, provincial state authorities collaborate with Syrian religious community leaders via this local forum. They established close relations with Syrian faith-based organisations, using religious solidarity as a point of reference for building on trust networks. Islamic references to migration experiences such as “*ensar*,” (host community) “*muhacir*,” (migrant) and “*hicra*” (migration) enhance solidarity among Muslims. Their narratives centre around the idea that “any tension is because of provocations aimed at dividing the Muslim community.”⁴⁸ This provocation-focused narrative aims to build conflict prevention mechanisms among locals and Syrians. The reactions to the anti-Syrian protests of July 2017 typify interactions between faith-based refugee organisations and host community actors with regards to conflict prevention at the provincial level. In that month, anti-Syrian discourse started to be widely disseminated through social media, escalating tensions in the province. It followed a tragic event in which a pregnant Syrian was raped and bludgeoned to death by Turkish attackers in Turkey’s north-western Sakarya province.⁴⁹

The province saw the emergence of a grassroots initiative – the self-titled *Akıl/Alimler Girişimi* (Wise Men Initiative) that comprised mainly local organisations who invited refugee-created faith-based organisations. The Initiative was composed of representatives from the umbrella forum Humanitarian Aid Platform and of Syrian religious scholars and leaders. They organised a workshop called “Civic Prevention Mechanisms Workshop for the People’s Peace” to discuss how to prevent rising anti-Syrian sentiments from disrupting social cohesion in the city.

The workshop also included Iraqi and Palestinian migrant associations and religious figures.⁵⁰ Participants in the workshop referred to themes such as *ensar*, *muhacir*, and Islamic brotherhoods. Turkish NGO representatives underlined the need for caution against provocateurs who try to “mess up Turkey.”⁵¹ The workshop produced a public statement warning Syrians not to disrupt the public order and norms of locals. The statement contained seven points of advice to Syrian refugees living in the city.

Public Statement of the Wise Men Initiative: Advice to Syrian refugees in Gaziantep

1-Develop social relations with local neighbours in a kind manner.

2-The most common complaint about Syrians in the city is about Syrians' noisy lifestyle bothering locals in the same building. Be careful about the sensitivities of your neighbours, respect them. You will see that they will reciprocate with respect. The worldwide norm is that guests comply with the rules of the host. We should be grateful to the people of this country, the people of this city and the government which opened their arms to us like ensar in our hardest times. If it is not urgent, please do not go out after 23.00.

3- Do not smoke water-pipe tobacco, play, lay down to relax, listen to music and speak on the phone in high volume in public places such as parks, squares, and streets. Do not laugh loudly and make a mess in your neighbourhood. Do not loiter if there is no need to. Please warn Syrians who do not behave properly.

4- Do not hang around as a sole individual or as a big group of Syrians. Hang around as 2-3 persons. If possible, hang around with your local neighbours. This is important for your security and to have a witness if something happens.

5- Do not respond if someone teases you in provocation. If this person insults you badly, call the 155 police line to ask for help.

6- As provincial security forces informed us, Syrians involved in crime and those who encourage others in crime will be immediately deported in order to protect innocent Syrians.

7- We hope that you will take our warnings into account for the security of the Syrian and Turkish publics. We hope that better days await the peoples of Syria and Turkey and that God will help us as muhacir and Urfa people as ensar. We hope that God will not give opportunities to people with bad intentions.[52](#)

In addition to sharing this statement with the media, representatives from the workshop made house visits in neighbourhoods with large Syrian populations. During these visits, they communicated the aforementioned statement.[53](#) Recognising locals' increasing hostility and seeking to avoid further tensions, Syrians seemed to accept these measures. However, it was difficult to assess the exact impact of such statements on the Syrian refugee community. As such, there is not sufficient evidence to argue that this initiative alone reduced the tension. Nevertheless, this statement is worth analysing as an instance in which Syrian and local faith-based actors came together to reduce communal tensions.

Although the initiative seemed promising for also including Syrian faith-based actors in activities aimed at preventing tension, its advice is problematic. This, as it reinforces the hierarchical relationship between locals and Syrians, putting the Syrians in an inferior position. It is based on the premise of the "guest" status of Syrians vis-à-vis the "host" status of local people. The recommendations are problematic for rights-based approaches to Syrian refugees as they imply limiting Syrians' freedom and basic rights. Most of the advice urges Syrians to maintain a low profile and avoid disrupting the lifestyle of locals. Additionally, warnings about deportation feed into a constantly looming threat. Moreover, the advice of calling the police if a Syrian is insulted seems unrealistic, considering that Syrians suffer mistreatment from security forces and that some lack legal documents. The last point, inferring ensar and muhacir, has a strong religious connotation and reproduces Turkish state discourse about refugee

governance.

Despite its highly controversial content, the implementation of this initiative through collaboration between local and refugee faith-based actors makes it a significant tool for conflict prevention. As such, it was an underdeveloped conflict prevention mechanism in border provinces hosting large numbers of Syrians like Şanlıurfa. Furthermore, it was a promising example of collaboration between Syrian and local associations, as well as indirect cooperation with state authorities. These characteristics gave it potential for increasing Syrian participation in refugee governance at the local level. However, it should be noted that in this particular instance, “participation” in reality came down to “compliance” with the “other’s” terms.

After a year and half, tensions in the province worsened and became more violent. State authorities then bypassed faith-based Syrian actors, which kept a low-profile. The response to a second incident is helpful in better understanding the interactions between refugee faith-based organisations and host province authorities. In October 2018, Şanlıurfa saw the murder of two Turkish citizens by Syrians, sparking long-running protests and lynchings that targeted all Syrians living in the city. Provincial state authorities took a strict stance against all forms of violence. The provincial government made announcements to calm the public by attributing the escalation to acts by isolated provocateurs. This narrative of provocation appeased parties who feared that the escalation would reach uncontrollable levels. Moreover, such announcements aimed to demonstrate that the provincial government had taken decisive action. It stated that “eight Syrians involved in criminal activities were under judicial investigation, and around 639 Syrians were deported due to criminal ties.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, many locals did not believe such explanations, feeling they were designed to threaten Syrians and appease locals.⁵⁵

Unlike the 2017 incidents, provincial authorities did not seek collaboration with “Wise Men Initiative”, despite its recent establishment to enhance collaboration. Rather, they specifically targeted local tribal actors for cooperation because of the context that triggered the tensions. The family of the murdered sons belonged to a large Arab tribe in the city. Thus, there was a risk that the members of the tribe would become involved in fighting and escalate tensions. The governor talked to leaders of the tribe about calming down and not seeking revenge. To assist, tribal leaders made a public announcement noting that “security forces took all necessary measures. We invite people of our city to calm down. We announce that we are with our state and we will not take part in any provocative events against Syrians.”⁵⁶ This announcement implied that these leaders supported the measures taken by the governorate and security forces and that they would discourage their communities from becoming involved in protests and violence.

Syrian community and faith leaders came together with the governor in consultations. The governor warned Syrians to respect the lifestyle of locals, specifically by avoiding noise at night in their neighbourhoods and public places. Syrian community leaders agreed that the measures were appropriate. They also expressed their sorrow at the murders. Recognising their limitations, they stated that “it is impossible for them to access all Syrians in the city, nevertheless they would do whatever they could do to prevent further escalation.”⁵⁷ They again expressed gratitude to locals, their support of the Turkish state, and to help assist implementation.⁵⁸

As in Gaziantep, community perceptions are not static. They can be “quickly upended by nationalist violence and trans-border ethnic ties.”⁵⁹ Despite strong familial and tribal ties across the border, ?anl?urfa has seen major violence at least twice. Although local non-state authorities carried out preventive roles, it was again the state, represented by the provincial government and security forces, that exercised the largest influence in stability and assimilation of Syrian refugees into the host community. It did so by supporting a framework of compliance with host community norms.

Though provincial authorities seek stability and the compliance of the Syrian refugee community with the terms of the local population, I was told by a state officer directing a Youth Center in the province that state authorities tacitly allowed protestors to terrify Syrian refugees for several days without intervening fully. The goal was to “teach” Syrians their limits and that the city belongs to locals. ?anl?urfa, like other cities, saw the rioters occasionally set the limits of spatial control over the refugees. Additionally, “emergency responses to the anti-Syrian riot reinforced ‘national’ boundaries between locals and refugees.”⁶⁰ It is inevitable that these boundaries also set limits for Syrian faith-based actors.

According to local experts, sharing economic resources and opportunities was a major cause of violent incidents between Syrians and Turks.⁶¹ Faith-based actors have far less influence over this factor. In 2018, Turkey experienced a currency and debt crisis that led to the closure of many companies, including small- and medium-sized businesses. The crisis saw the price of imported items and some foods rise along with higher unemployment. In ?anl?urfa – where economic development is relatively low and unemployment was already high – the crisis hit strongly. Increased food prices and unemployment negatively influenced the majority of the population, who already lived under the poverty line. ?anl?urfa shopkeepers had to close their shops due to accumulating debts worsened by the currency collapse.⁶² Within this environment, refugees’ high visibility, increasing businesses ownership and labour market participation made them an easy scapegoat.

Analysing the two episodes illustrates how faith-based actors, despite their good intentions, can implicitly serve the Turkish state priority of controlling Syrians’ presence through a narrative of social cohesion-social and harmony. The participation of these actors in the provincial meetings cannot be taken as evidence of substantive representation of Syrian community. Rather, it is an act of token inclusion of the Syrian community to local affairs because they are mainly expected compliance, but the relation is not regarded as one of mutual cooperation.

Conclusion

The 2018 incident made it clear that the once welcoming attitudes and narratives of ?anl?urfa locals are no longer valid and that the refugees’ presence had been challenged, or even criminalized. A local researcher studying Urban Sociology noted that “Even if the war ends in Syria, a socio-economic war will continue in Turkey.”⁶³ He adds that “right now Syrians are afraid, but the anger of locals is not over.”⁶⁴ It seems that the murders in ?anl?urfa may worsen already-poor local perceptions of Syrians. Moreover, scarce economic resources mean that the economy will remain a potential factor influencing communal tension. Such incidents and responses show that Syrian refugees face tenuous insecurity in all Turkish urban centres regardless of initially welcoming approaches.⁶⁵

Despite promising initial efforts, including Syrian faith-based actors in the context of economic crisis and escalating communal tensions, their role was limited. Furthermore, their efforts, intentionally or not, seemed to rather comply with the Turkish state's efforts to control Syrian presence, under the guise of "social cohesion." The precarious position of Syrian refugees in Turkey is furthered by their temporary protection status. As such, Syrian refugees in Turkey appear to have gradually lost their ability to claim some rights, and remain objects of humanitarian assistance and other means of civil assistance from national actors. Until now, faith-based actors seem unable to eliminate inequalities and limited access to rights and freedoms for Syrians.

In light of this case study, further research is necessary to investigate ways in which faith-based actors attempt to prevent violence between refugees and host communities in countries hosting large refugee populations. It is crucial to explore mechanisms for tension reduction, peace-building activities, and advocacy combating xenophobia and discrimination. It is also important to understand their coordination, cooperation and competition with other local actors in the refugee protection and integration fields. While faith-based actors form an important part of the context "involving local and religious actors should become neither a quick recipe for success nor a standardized strategy of action that separates out the local from the international, the religious from the secular."⁶⁶

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