

Chapter 10. Contextualizing Refugee NGOs in Izmir

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Introduction

Izmir became popular throughout the last few years as one of Turkey's refugee hotspots. Located next to several Greek islands hundreds of thousand refugees entered the metropolis in search for smugglers, who would organise their refuge across the Mediterranean Sea. According to UNHCR, over 350 000 refugees have arrived at Greek islands next to Izmir's coast during September and October 2015, when I collected the ethnographic material for this study (UNHCR, n.d.). Thus, over three hundred thousand people must have transited the city within these two months alone. However, this number doesn't include all those refugees, who have settled in Izmir or who are somehow stuck there. In autumn 2015, refugee NGOs estimated this number between 67,000 to 100,000 and counting. Most of these refugees were not registered, living on the streets in Basmane or in substandard flats or rooms in different districts around the city. While state or city authorities seemed to be overtaxed in regard to these large numbers of refugees, more and more associations which can be classified as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) emerged starting to work on the issue of immigrants and refugees. NGOs are recognized as civil society actors per excellence, which act within the sphere between the household and the state (Akkaya, 2012, p. 59). Though, what are these partly new established civil society associations actually doing on the ground and in interaction with refugees? How can these NGO practices be situated within refugees' daily needs and struggles? Furthermore, what other support systems are helping refugees to organize their new lives in their host country?

These questions among others lay at the core of my research as I carried out ethnographic fieldwork during August, September and October 2015 with refugee NGOs and refugees in Izmir. Thus, instead of approaching the field of refugees from the perspective of refugee or forced migration studies, I apply civil society conceptions as a theoretical basis. An anthropological understanding of civil society differs from dominating liberal political approaches. Robert Layton's offers a useful definition:

"Since the household is virtually universal in human societies I shall use civil society to refer specifically to social organisations occupying the space between the household and the state that enable people to co-ordinate their management of resources and activities." (Layton, 2004, p. 3, emphasis in original)

Layton as well as other anthropologists like Chris Hann, Elisabeth Dunn or David Lewis argue, that not only formal NGOs belong to civil society but also other socio-cultural institutions like kinship or ethnic groups and informal networks (Hann, 2010; Hann & Dunn, 1996; Lewis, 2004). Therefore, my research focus during observations remained on different forms of civil society and not only NGOs.

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All in all, I visited and interviewed six associations and carried out one in-depth case analysis at the association “Bridging People”. Furthermore, I hold problem centred interviews with eleven households covering 56 refugees with different ages, genders, ethnicities and social classes. This conference contribution presents several parts of the ethnographic outcomes of the MA thesis. The outcomes generated from the ethnographic data by situational analysis and qualitative content analysis might not only be relevant for civil society discourses but also the general field of refugee and forced migration studies. However, the theoretical discussion on civil society and anthropology which results from these findings won’t be discussed within this contribution.

Refugee NGOs

Following six associations were interviewed for the study: “Bridging People (Halklararası Dayanışma Köprüsü Derneği)” (HK), “MülteciDer” (MD), “Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants” (ASAM), Hatuniye Ilim Yayma ve Israfi Önleme Derneği” (HD), “Beşir Derneği” (BD) and “Suriyeli Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneği” (SMDD). These associations are all legally recognized by state authorities. The associations’ profiles and characteristics are summarised in the first section. The second section provides one example from the in-depth case study on HK.

While three of these six organisations exclusively work on refugee issues (MD, ASAM, SMDD), the other three have a broader range of topics and address other groups as well (HK, HD, BD). Two specific organisations are local branches of a larger national organisation (ASAM, BD). ASAM is a specific case as the organisation is an official partner of UNHCR and therefore responsible for registrations of refugees around the country. Most of the local organisations in Izmir were established within the last few years. Half of the organizations have employees, who carry out the work; the other half is based on volunteer work. Most people getting involved with organisations belong to the higher-educated middle class. Employees and volunteers are gender-mixed in most NGOs. Two of those with employees are project-based, thus they are financed by larger institutions like the EU or UN. These two organizations are also the only ones, which are following a rights-based approach trying to maintain a politically neutral position. Consequently, they can be recognized as classical Western NGOs. The other organisations are dependent on private donations. Two associations are based on Islamic ideology and one can be positioned as left pro-Kurdish. The last one of the six associations has no clear ideological connotation.

Rights-based and left-wing oriented organisations collaborate for different activities and also Islamic organisations collaborate with each other. However, there is no cooperation between these two larger ideological groups, even though they share similar goals or claim the same demands. This unwillingness to cooperate over cross-cuttings, especially Islamic and non-Islamic, fits in line with outcomes from other contributions on civil society in Turkey i.e. from Sefa Simsek or Anne Duncker (Simsek, 2004; Duncker, 2009). All of the associations have some sort of office, and three of them are receiving refugees only within their offices. The other three are out-reaching and thus connect with refugees at places, where they stay or

where they are needed. Most of the six organisations distribute some sort of material help, in form of food or family packages. Two give legal assistance and two serve hot meals. Two offer medical or health services and one offers specific courses and services². As a side effect all of them provide information for refugees during interactions.

Case Study “Family Package Distribution”

One main activity of HK is the distribution of family packages in the district of Basmane. This activity took place regularly and was sometimes accompanied by doctors and medical staff who volunteer for the association and offer free medical check-ups. The association collects donations from private persons, who can bring their contributions to the association’s office. I analysed this activity by applying situational analysis (Breidenstein & et al, 2013, p. 150ff). Therefore, I divided the activity in three parts: Volunteers first meet to prepare the bags at the office; second, they move to Basmane to meet with further volunteers, who help with the distribution – often between twenty and forty people; and third the actual distribution starts and volunteers get together in smaller groups to distribute the packages. The analysis of these three different parts reveals several outcomes concerning the three actors involved: volunteers, refugees and other participants from international organisations or media.

HK understands itself as an inclusive solidarity group and welcomes everyone to join them. The inhibition level is very low and they offer easy ways to participate in their activities. The association involves doctors, university professors, teachers, engineers, students, jobless people and also one Arabic teacher, who came to Turkey as a refugee. Especially during preparation times and in group meetings social cohesion and communication between volunteers is strengthened. People meet others with same interests and establish new friendships. However, during the actual interaction with refugees in Basmane the majority of participating volunteers remain silent or passive. Only a small group of coordinating volunteers and translators, overall two Syrians, get in direct contact with beneficiaries by addressing them on the street, asking questions and communicating with them. Refugees use this opportunity to ask for more help or further information. Beneficiaries, who received packages, don’t know which association is organising it, though they often remember the translators, as for example Hüseyin³, a Syrian immigrant volunteering as a translator, told me. Thus, there is hardly any direct contact and communication between NGO volunteers and refugees. The large number of volunteers however, enables the association to reach more refugees as they can carry and distribute more packages during distributions.

At these distributions and also at weekly meetings journalists or activists from other international organisations join the association. They need local associations to gain access to the field of refugees and receive information on the situation. As observed during several field visits local organisations are first starting points for

² This is the status quo from autumn 2015 and NGOs have adopted or broadened their activities since then. For example, HK recently started to offer language and literacy courses and SMDD opened a medical centre for women in collaboration with another international organisation.

³ I changed the name to keep my interlocutor’s privacy.

international organisations (IOs) as they immediately approach them after their arrival in Izmir. Development anthropologists already established an understanding of local NGOs as intermediaries or brokers within development theories (Mosse & Lewis, 2006, p. 9f). It seems that this approach also works for NGOs in other fields. Alessandro Monsutti and Boris-Mathieu Pétric argue furthermore that NGOs and IOs become new political arenas within the last few years, which need to be taken into account while discussing political society (Monsutti & Pétric, 2009, p. 8). However, as I want to situate NGO practices within the perspective and situation of refugees themselves, the next section deals with refugees' living conditions and needs in relation to NGOs' activities.

Reality Check: Refugees' Needs and NGO Practices

Most refugees in Turkey live outside of camps provided by the Turkish state. UNHCR has recently highlighted the vulnerability of these refugees who face difficulties on different levels (3RP Refugee&Resilience Plan, 2016, p. 4). Especially urban refugees live under devastating conditions as other scholars have already explained (Icduygu, 2015, p. 1). Testimonials from interviewed refugees as well as the observation of refugees housing conditions during my own fieldwork showed that the same is true for refugees in Izmir. As neither registered nor non-registered refugees receive direct financial support by the state, refugees struggle to make a living. Therefore, the most urgent need for refugees settling in the city is to find jobs and adequate houses. Eight of the eleven interviewed families already lived in flats and the other three families were still staying on the streets. Those living in houses had some sort of job or work to earn money. The houses, the families were living in, were very simple, substandard flats in cheap areas. Often these flats merely consisted of one or two rooms for each family. Most families are composed of at least five family members and often extended family members belong to the household as well. Several flats lacked doors and windows not to mention furniture or heating.

However, in order to afford these houses, refugees need some type of job. As access to the job market is strongly restricted for refugees most of them end up in the informal sector with illegal jobs. These jobs are mostly done by men. Families, in which men are missing or physically injured, women work for example by rolling cigarettes or collecting trash. Their children aren't going to school, so they are staying at home the whole time like most of the women. Job conditions are marked by long working hours and travelling times to get there. Besides that, employees can never be sure to have work on the following day, as it is irregular and insecure. Salaries are low and as these jobs are often illicit work, workers' rights are non-existent and employers do not always pay the salaries at all. As one interviewee, working in interurban transportation, poignantly stated: "We are working like donkeys, but they don't pay" (PD26, 76). Nevertheless, the families are dependent on them and those without jobs are eager to find work. In addition, most families have severe health problems and can't afford medication not mentioning the language barrier which complicates their situation even further.

Refugee NGOs have a broad knowledge concerning these conditions and inform journalists on this situation. By analyzing their activities, it becomes obvious that most of the NGOs try to ease financial problems by humanitarian aid. As mentioned

early most associations distribute some sort of family packages or food. Besides, only few projects like language courses exist, which would have long-term effects on refugees' living conditions. Although finding jobs is one of the most urgent needs for refugees, so far only one association addresses this issue. SMDD, an association led by Syrian immigrants, operates as a platform, which tries to connect employers and employees. Nevertheless, this association has only few personal and material resources which restrict their work. In reference to the general numbers outlined at the beginning of this paper, it has to be mentioned that refugee NGOs can only reach a small part of those refugees staying in Izmir. For example, ASAM as the largest refugee NGO with twenty full-time employees reached 23,234 refugees, who came to their office for any kind of consultation within the eleven months since the branch had opened in December 2014 (PD35, 174). MD, another professional NGO, has two full-time employees who can consequently reach fewer beneficiaries in the same time than the large office from ASAM. While these two associations and also SMDD mostly reach refugees staying in Izmir, HD and BD as Islamic charity organisations but also HK address refugees staying on the streets in Basmane. Many of these refugees won't settle down in the city, as they still try to find ways to reach Europe. Thus, HK, HD and BD mostly serve those refugees who are not counted within the 100,000 refugees mentioned above. In any case, a large majority of refugees in Izmir never had contact with any organisation, let alone received help. Nevertheless, they are coping and managing their new life situations. Though, as observed during the field work, they are not left alone with this. In fact, other forms of civil society become active within this field helping and supporting refugees in organising their new lives.

Other Forms of Civil Society

During interviews and informal talks as well as observations different kinds of informal networks and support systems were revealed. These informal networks aren't visible in the first place and often refugees aren't consciously recognizing them as support or help. NGOs, who receive their beneficiaries only within their offices like ASAM, MD or HD, however already understood that there must be some kind of networks among refugees in Izmir which lead them to their offices. For example, one employee from MD explained, they don't have to reach out to refugees by themselves as the information concerning their work is passing through mouth-to-mouth networks. Employees from ASAM had the same experience. If they have packages to distribute, they only call some of their clients knowing that each family will come along with their neighbors and several other families. Otherwise, both organisations would have to put some part of their resources into finding and building up relations to refugees, who are spread around the city. In the case of HK these networks are also active during package distributions in Basmane. The information concerning the package distribution is spread immediately in the area as more and more women and children arrive directly at the places, where the volunteers distribute the packages. In several occasions I observed that men led women directly to the volunteers; and the places which became extremely crowded during the distributions, were nearly empty only a short time after the activity ended. Most of the interviewees have neighbors or relatives who helped them with finding flats and/or materials like carpets, cupboards, TVs, furniture or dishes. In addition,

they also received information for example, how they can get further help from associations as just mentioned. These neighbors are often refugees themselves or Kurdish in the case of those refugees living in Kadifekale, a large district with a Kurdish majority.

Another example to demonstrate informal forms of civil society is a group of Syrian friends who came to Izmir before the civil war started. They witnessed Syrian refugees having difficulties to communicate with doctors and medical staff in hospitals and on the streets. Therefore, they took action spontaneously and started to translate for them. Later on this group institutionalized their activities through the foundation of a formal association, SMDD. Until now SMDD remains a formal association which operates on a rather informal basis. Furthermore, there are Facebook groups on the internet which provide information for refugees. SMDD has such a site but also two Syrian friends, who are active in associations as well, are leading private Facebook groups, where they inform refugees on how to organise their lives in Izmir. These pages are in Arabic and Turkish. Thus with the resources of two people this group is reaching around thousand followers.

Most of these activities outlined above are actually similar to the work that NGOs do. Though, as mentioned in the introduction, these informal forms of civil society are mostly ignored within dominant approaches to civil society. These neighborhood, kinship and Syrian solidarity networks as well as Facebook groups however, are forms of social organisations, which act within the sphere between the household and the state. All of them help to manage and organise resources and activities within the context of refugees and therefore fit perfectly into Layton's definition on civil society. Furthermore, it could be argued, that these networks even go in line with liberal political definitions highlighting civil society's contribution to "good society", social cohesion and stability.

Conclusion

Izmir's NGO landscape is highly dynamic and especially in relation to the influx of Syrian refugees within the last few years new associations established. Coming from different ideological backgrounds professional and voluntary organisations aim to address and support refugees by providing different services. Most NGOs carry out humanitarian aid and – unconsciously or consciously – help out with information. Only few associations offer services with long-term effects like language programs or legal assistance. Although NGOs are only able to reach a small proportion of the large number of refugees in the city, they hold key positions in regard to connecting the field of refugees with the media, international organisations or academics. Journalists, IOs and also scholars need NGOs as intermediaries to gain access to and information on refugees in Izmir. However, focussing on refugees and their needs and struggles, it is obvious that most of them never got help from NGOs and still they manage to organise their new life situations. The ethnographic material from this study reveals several other support systems that are active in the context of refugees. Informal neighbourhood and kinship networks, Syrian solidarity groups and Facebook groups on the internet offer material help, translations and information on how things are working in Izmir. Furthermore, they inform refugees on possible ways to gain further help, for

example from formal NGOs. These informal networks facilitate NGO work and operate to some extent as prerequisites for (office-based) refugee NGOs, which otherwise would have to constantly invest resources into getting in contact with refugees. Thus, neighbourhood and kinship networks as well as solidarity and virtual Facebook groups are forms of social organisations, which facilitate the organisation and management of resources and activities. From an anthropological perspective they therefore belong to civil society. In addition, civil society can be understood as a new form of local organisation for refugees, who are cut off from their former institutions of social organisation through their refuge. This is not only relevant for civil society theories but also the field of refugee or forced migration studies, which so far hardly take non-state actors or civil society into consideration (Betts, 2014, p. 69).

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Primary documents (Interviews)

- PD26: Anonymous, Interview on the 22nd September 2015, Kadifekale
- PD35: Ahmet (ASAM), Interview on the 6th October 2015, Alsancak