

Chapter 18. Solidarity with Syrian Immigrants with the Power of Islamic Beliefs and Volunteerism

Emel Topçu¹ and Sevgi Kurtulmuş²

Introduction

Nowadays, 2,733,784 refugee Syrian people are legally registered in Turkey. They constitute 2.7 % of Turkish population. During last 4 years, Turkey has received a mass amount of migrant without being properly prepared. 1.5 million of the Syrians live in the cities which are close to the border. For example, in one city like Kilis, the number of the Syrian refugee is more than the inhabitants of the city. During the five years of Syrian war, Kilis, a town of 90,000 inhabitants, located on the Syrian border has welcomed 120,000 Syrians who are fleeing from war since 2011. How come in such a short time can one town absorb more than its population peacefully? This question has encouraged us for our study. There are so many organisations and persons in Turkey working to help Syrians; so, we have also joined to one of these voluntary groups which is initiated by a female teacher, Nezahat Albay, in Ankara. By this group we have performed participatory observation which guided us to formulate our research questions. We did not have any theory or any hypothesis but we had our curiosity to find out why, how, where the volunteers work with Syrians. We let the field to formulate its own story.

We found out that these mainly religiously motivated volunteers take this mass forced migration from neighbouring country Syria as a challenge to demonstrate their faith as Ansar. Ansar; “The Helpers” is an Islamic term which is used for the local inhabitants of Medina who brotherly and sisterly welcomed the Muslims who fled from Mekka in the first years of Islam with prophet Muhammed (Pbuh). At that time Muslims were consisting fifteen percent of Medina population. After migration, Prophet Muhammed united inhabitants of the Medina who belong to various religious and ethnic groups around a social convention. This period is recognised as the “Golden Age of Islam” and been an example for all Muslims for ages. Many people living in Turkey has seen this mass migration as an opportunity to realise the initial dynamics of the “Golden Age of Islam” as mentioned above. Turkey is not legally a migration country and is not prepared for such a great and instant migrated population like so many other European countries even though they have migration policies. Turkish people have accepted this migration peacefully and helped to immigrants and filled the gaps which could not be filled by government.

¹ Emel Topçu is Associate Professor of Political Science and Manager of Global Migration Centre at the Social Science University of Ankara, Hükümet Meydanı No: 2, PK: 06030 Ulus, Altındağ, Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: emel.topcu@asbu.edu.tr

² Sevgi Kurtulmuş is Professor of Economics and Vice-Chancellor of the Social Science University of Ankara, Hükümet Meydanı No: 2, PK: 06030 Ulus, Altındağ, Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: sevgi.kurtulmus@asbu.edu.tr

Literature Review

Despite the increasing number of refugees and the people who volunteer in the world, until recently, little research has focused on this subject. Many researchs about the subject is performed in USA which is an immigrant country, but most of them are targeted about the social work for the immigrant people. The broadest work came true by the editorship of Balgopal P. R. under the title of “Social Work Practice with Immigrants and Refugees”.

In this mentioned study, the performed social works for immigrants came from Asia, Latin countries, Africa and Europe to USA have been investigated. However, there are only a few articles about the refugees in this work (Balgopal, Pallassana R, ed. 2000). Another work in this area is “Social Work with Immigrants and Refugees, Legal Issues, Clinical Skills, and Advocacy” edited by Chang-Muy and Congress, and in this study social service on health for immigrants have been evaluated. (Chang-Muy & Congress, ed., 2016) There are also various articles besides these studies investigating social work for the immigrants and the refugees (Rowe and Spees, 1987; Timberlake, Cook and Kim,1984; Ryan, 1992; Valtonen, 2008; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Snyder, et al, 2005).

Furthermore, in Britain, volunteerism of the immigrants and its effect on integration has been studied ³. The main two studies about the voluntary work for the refugees, almost similar with our study are performed in Germany. These studies date back to, 2015, after the Syrian refugees’ arrival to Germany. This study, “Strukturen und Motive der ehrenamtlichen Flüchtlingsarbeit (EFA) in Deutschland” is performed by Humboldt University Berlin searched about who are working for the Syrian refugees, how are they organised, what do they do, what is their motivation (Karakayali and Kleist, 2015).

The other study in Germany is “Engagement für Flüchtlinge in München” and it has made by the collaboration of two institutes as Hochschule München and Münchner Forschungsinstitut Miss and the issue is studying in the scope of Munich. These both researches have studied in similar topics and with similar methods as monitoring the self organisation of the volunteers to serve refugees in various areas as translation services accommodation, shopping, accompanying in official paper works. However, these volunteers have worked individually, without recognising the other volunteers and worked only in one area just like translation etc. (Mutz, et al.,2015)

Both studies show similarities with our study about Nezahat Albay and her volunteer group, on the issues start of volunteerism, spontaneity etc. However, our study differentiates from these two studies because it is a case study and the volunteer group provides to the Syrian refugees a compact service as receiving them from the city bus station, finding houses and furnishing them, supplying food, finding jobs, accompanying to the government offices and hospitals, translations, giving language courses, organising free time activities as picnics, iftar etc., help them to organise their wedding ceremonies, social activities, house visits.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-rules-statement-of-changes#statement-of-changes-to-the-immigration-rules-2008>

After these services provided, the family is not left alone and the volunteers keep their communication and relationship with the families. The group is serving to gradually increasing numbers of families which is 150 families until now, for 4 years, since the first day the Syrians have arrived at Ankara, 2012. This service arrives at almost thousand people. We have not discovered any other volunteer group work providing refugees all of the mentioned services at once all around the World.

Methodology

As the Syrian civil war and mass immigration of Syrians to Turkey started, a group which is initiated by Nezahat Albay to help to Syrians. The group works in Altındağ district which is highly populated by Syrians since 2012 when the first comer Syrian refugees arrived at Ankara. We have also started to this group to help Syrians since the beginning of 2015. This area has various slum neighborhoods where poor people live in and many houses were evacuated as a result of urban renovation. Thus, Syrian families rented these evacuated houses especially in Baraj and Önder as well as regular apartments. We joined to the Nezahat Albay Volunteer group by visiting families and the Syrian schools including the school “Sıdıka Kınacı” managed by the volunteer group of Nezahat Albay. Some of the volunteers in this group have started a kinder garden inside the school for Syrian children as well.

We have also evaluated our participation as “participant observation method” for our study. After one year of participatory research, by the beginning of 2016 we have started to conduct semi-structured focus group work. Participant of the focus group the volunteers in Nezahat Albay’s group who were working as Turkish language teachers in the language course which is initiated by themselves for the Syrian refugee women and children. They were not only working as teachers but also almost all other work groups do as delivering the food finding houses, visiting the families, etc. After completing some of the focus group work we have also started “in depth interviews” with the member of this volunteer group and the Syrian women receiving service from this group.

We have firstly made 8 “focus group Meeting” with the volunteer group consisting of 15 teachers at the school they work. The focus group work happened every week at the same hour, at the same place and took almost 4 hours in each. Their ages range between 27-55. Furthermore, we have observed the school, the Syrians at the school during our visits to the school. We witness how the poor Turkish neighbours of the same slum come to the school to ask help for the new comers of the Syrians. Additionally, we visited classrooms to observe and participate the language lessons and chat with Syrian women. We also participated a 200 persons meeting dedicated to memorise and honour the Syrian refugees which was organised by Nezahat Albay group. We also reviewed the literature about volunteerism and refugees. To sum, we have used the methods as literature review, participant observation, in-depth interview and focus group meeting as the method.

Nezahat Albay and Her Volunteer Group

She was born in Ankara in 1968. She has studied history at the college and started to work as a history teacher. After the coup in 1997 in Turkey she dismissed from her job since she wears a headscarf for her religious believes. She had to work in unqualified various jobs for many years until she could return back her to job in 2013. By the time she has worked volunteerly in NGOs for 30 years actively.

Before starting to help Syrian refugees she has a personal experience helping a Sudanese family consists of a single mother and 5 children. They lived together in the same house for three years before they depart for Canada. She has hosted them for free and helped them in their official paper works, health problems, translation issues, etc. She still has connection with the family.

Nezahat Albay lives in Altındağ, Baraj neighbourhood where the new Syrian refugees mostly settled down in Ankara. She firstly observed the refugees around her and heard about the difficulties they encounter especially because the language barrier.

“When I heard that Syrian refugees have arrived to our neighbourhood, I started to visit them to see what they need. I realised that women have great trouble because of the language barrier and they even die at the hospitals when they can not express themselves.” (N.A., Turkish, female, 46, volunteer and teacher of Syrians)⁴

Thus, she first decided to teach them Turkish to help them to integrate with the society efficiently to gain self sufficiency. She argued her idea with her ex-students who are teachers to start language course for the Syrians. As a result of the trust for Nezahat Albay due to her character and life history full with examples of volunteerism she had immediate positive answers. She has reorganised warehouse of her family next to her house into a classroom. They have delivered leaflets in Arabic around to neighbours inviting Syrians to the courses.

As the attendees increased the course got insufficient and they found support of the Ministry of Education to move the course to a public school to use their buildings only at 2014⁵ as a result of the agreement signed between volunteer groups working for the education of the Syrian refugees and the Ministry of Education. At first the education programme became formal but the teachers were still volunteer. The teachers worked at this school as full time volunteers for one more year. This made almost two volunteer years work for them. They were receiving a small amount salary 150 dollars for a few more months which were not even covering their travel expences since 2015. After 7 months their salary increased to 300 dollars which is almost one third amount of a formal teacher. This small monthly payment for the teachers was first covered by “Diyaret Foundation”, then it is conveyed to the UNICEF since the beginning of 2016.

This volunteer group was every day growing. Now they are almost 30 people. All of them are women and they shape their lives according to the islamic religious

⁴ Quotations are followed with the description of the attendee in a paranthesize with the order of the first capitals of her name and surname, nationality, sex, age and occupation.

⁵ http://mevzuat.meb.gov.tr/html/yabyonegiogr_1/yabyonegiogr_1.html, 23.09.2014, Erişim tarihi 25.03.2016.

codes of conducts. 15 of them are teachers. Also Nezahat Albay's 15 friends joined them to supply, provide, seek for utilities, jobs, translation services for the refugees. Group activities have been developed according to the need of the Syrians.

They help Syrian by renting houses, providing furniture and foods, paying utilities, organizing language courses, helping to organize wedding parties and finally finding job. As an example, husband of one of the volunteers has a factory and they employ male part of the Syrian families who are looking for job with fair salary and conditions.

"Nezahat and her friends have helped us to find houses, find jobs and build a life. We started their Turkish classes. Then we have called our other relatives in Syria, trusting their help for Syrians and they helped them all" (Q.I, Syrian, female, 34, housewife)

As an information channel they use whatsapp new informations flows everyday. They inform each other about the needs of the Syrians they know and learn during their regular house visits and with their connections at the schools. When an emergent payment of a Syrian appears as the rent, or bilss when they stay unemployed or when their salaries are not paid unfairly, they write to this group and collect the money from each other or from the people they know.

This collaboration started by woman and has become a women action; additionally, they serve to Syrian women. Thus, this is a woman to woman help action. The help of the men are secondary sources. Women ask their husbands to find job for Syrians, ask for money, ask them to take the utilities by car, or carry stuff. Furthermore, men get better solutions in the official Works like getting social security number, registration, ID card, etc. because they have better connections with government offices. However, women enter the houses easier since Syrian women can trust them and do not get scared. Therefore, Nezahat Albay group is in connection with male volunteers and ask for their help for various mentioned works.

The volunteer group also has a role as multiplicator and ice breaker between Syrian and people in Turkey. Some of the volunteers say that some of their relatives, neighbours and friends has had prejudices about Syrians. For example, friends of one of the volunteers, as a joke, say that it is possible that she has lice from Syrians and they do not want to touch her. (F.A., Turkish, female, 43, volunteer and teacher) This is a hard joke representing their perception about Syrians. Another one says even her mother in law did not like and want Syrians and see them as a threat. (F.B., Turkish, 34, female, 34, volunteer and teacher) However, after observing the work of the volunteers with Syrians and listening to the stories and lives of the Syrians, many of these people changed their minds about Syrians and started to like and understand them better. Furthermore, these volunteers are seen as help-paratoners and besides collecting help for Syrians happily, other people also give their charities (Sadaka, zakath, almosan, giving to poor, which are Islamic good deeds, and zakath, giving %2,5 of the certain amount of income to poors is obligatory and one of the pillars of Islam) for Syrians to the volunteers.

This group also have a peculiar connection within itself based on trust, transparency, freindship and they also enjoy their job and work environment really. They mention their life before Syrians as "my former life" and they appreciate these

new selves of them hardworking, giving, being useful, being loved by the students and respected.

“In my former life, I was anxious about many details of the life, I used to shop for fun, now I do not care about them, my husband is very content since I am a lot happier now.” (S. Y., Turkish, 35 female, volunteer and teacher)

Besides their friendship, their motivation varies with religious bases. Their main aim is to perform in the behaviour of ansar in their own life. As we mentioned before, ansar is the host in Medina for one of the first refugee muslims from Mecca in the Islamic history. Even the ansar who are the muslims of the Medina were the minority in all the population, only fifteen percent, they embraced muhajirun and matched every ansar family with a muhajirun family; thus, they acted as an example to shape all over the city. This new invention on relationship between ansar and muhajirun lead a new social convention between all parts of the society in Medina. This ansar muhajirun example has been a part of Islamic understanding as theory but it became a fact in the lives of Muslims in Turkey as a result of Syrian civil war.

“We feel ourselves as ansar in our century for Syrians and we want to be good ansars.” (M.B., 36, Turkish, female, volunteer and teacher)

They also very often check their feeling to be sincere, righteous and religious when they help Syrians. One focus group participant explained that she felt like there is baby with dirty pamper, somebody must relief this baby, and she is the one who is doing this job without hesitating. Thus, as in this example, when you do this job there is no proudness, nothing putting the others lower than you; but you can only be happy since baby feels better. (P.Ö., Turkish, female, 36, volunteer and teacher). The voluntary group is happy for what they are doing and they are basically motivated religiously. Therefore, from this study, our findings are listed as;

Key Findings

The members of this voluntary group are all religiously motivated.

They see the situation as a challenge to demonstrate their faith. They want to act just like ANSAR.

Their coming together to work as voluntary group is based on trust to Nezahat Albay. TRUST is also key word here.

Through this work they are all happier than before.

Their perception to Syrian has positively changed through this work.

They act like multiplicator between Syrian and People who live in Turkey.

They say that they are learning a lot from Syrian and it changes their lives.

They don't only help they also develop a friendship. (yesterday night one of our focus group participant wrote me that her students named her new born baby after her name)

As short they perform a compact service. This is unique.

Results and Evaluation

As a result of mass migration of Syrians to Turkey after 2012, in addition to government, NGOs and volunteer people helped a lot to Syrian refugees. Without their help it would not run so smoothly as it is till now. This mass migration triggered to remember the story of Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) from Mecca to

Medina. In this story muslims from Medina embraced the muslim migrants from Mecca with love, friendship, sincerity, generosity and they shared everything what they have. This happened through a new invention in the society by matching the ansar (host from Medina) and muhajirun (migrant from Mecca) families to each other. Through this remembrance the most of the people of Turkey wanted to demonstrate their deep religiosity by imitating the ansar. They also want to embrace Syrian refugees with love, friendship, sincerity, generosity as ansar did. Sadaka, zakath, and almosan are also the other Islamic obligations dictating giving to the poor and needy people activated to help the Syrians.

Religiously motivated Nezahat Albay is also one of these volunteers. She has motivated a part of her friends, and ex-students to build a volunteer group for a compact help service for the Syrians. Members of these group are all women and religiously motivated. Their compact help service consists of teaching the Turkish language, providing houses, furniture, daily expenditure paying utilities, accompany to the government officers and to the hospitals, translating, finding job, etc. Thus, they are women it was easier for them to contact the Syrian refugees through the female part of the families, enter their houses and grasp their problems in a better and more exact way.

As a result, works of NGOs and volunteers especially with Islamic motivations and considering the examples of ansar and muhajirun lead a better and more efficient welcoming Syrian refugees as a consequence Syrian civil war and mass migration. Nezahat Albay and her volunteer group which consist of the religiously motivated women group is one of the example to explain how the mass migration from Syria has been managed relatively easily even the country was unprepared for this chaotic migration.

References

- Balgopal, P. R. (ed.) (2000). *Social Work Practice with Immigrants and Refugees*, Columbia University Press, New York
- Chang-Muy, F. & Congress, E. P. (ed.) (2016). *Social Work with Immigrants and Refugees*. Springer Publishing Company, New York.
- Karakayali, S., Kleist, J. O. (2015). "Strukturen und Motive der ehrenamtlichen Flüchtlingsarbeit (EFA) in Deutschland", *Berliner Institut für empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung (BIM)*, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
- Mutz, G. et al. (2015). *Engagement für Flüchtlinge in München*, Hochschule München in Kooperation mit dem Münchner Forschungsinstitut miss
- Potocky-Tripodi, M. (2002). *Best Practices For Social Work With Refugees And Immigrants*, Columbia University Press New York.
- Rowe D.R. and Spees H.P. (1987). "Fresno County Refugee Health Volunteer Project: a case study in cross-cultural health care delivery", *Migration World Magazine* 15(4): 22-27.
- Ryan, A. S. (1992). "Social Work with Immigrants and Refugees", *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, 2(1).
- Snyder, C. S. et al. (2005). *Social Work with Bosnian Muslim Refugee Children and Families: A Review of Literature*. Child Welfare League of America
- Timberlake, E., Cook, M., Kim, O. (1984). *Social Work and Vietnamese Refugee*, National Association of Social Workers Inc.
- Valtonen, K. (2008). *Social Work and Migration: Immigrant and Refugee Settlement and Integration*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Group
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-rules-statement-of-changes#statement-of-changes-to-the-immigration-rules-2008>