

Chapter 22. A New Exploited Class: Syrian Refugees

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Introduction

There is more than one definition for ‘migration’. Depending on how one handles the definition of the approach also changes. Reaching a consensus on a perfect definition of migration is almost impossible, since it has too many aspects to consider. In a very broad sense, migration can be defined as the process of the movement and the adaptation of people who move from one place to another for a set of reasons, including but not limited to fulfilling their needs, over a specific period of time (Brown & Moore, 1970). Whichever the definition of migration is taken into account, it is an event that changes almost everything both in the lives of migrating people and the people on the route. In a way, understanding the diachronic changes in history is achieved by looking at the migrations; people arriving at a place tend to change and cause some changes in the culture of the people that dwell in that place which creates a “*Demographic Whirlwind*” which can be both an opportunity or a threat (Morland, 2014, p. 8).

Migration, today, is in a great parallel with thinking of the concept ‘globalization’ (Çetin, 2012). Imbalanced economies, wars, inadequate sources, etc. cause people move from one place to another, and it has been made easy with today’s globalized boundaries and developed transportation facilities. Expected changes on the cultures of both receiving and moving people are still in huge amounts when compared to past. In general terms, migrating people are expected to show some resistance to the culture of the receiving people, but in time, they are considered to be assimilated. Although there are many examples proving this true, there are also many others that simply do not.

Geographical conditions hold a significant position for the concept of migration. If a place is like a bridge between two distinct cultures and at the center of a great imbalance between two sides, it is likely to be more familiar with the concept of migration, whether it be a permanent stop, or simply a transfer camp. Anatolia, as holding democratic and economically more settled Europe on side and Middle East that is the center of conflicts over a long period of time on the other, is such a bridge. Migration is not a novel concept for Anatolian cultures from the early times of history. Anatolia and Fertile Crescent are the places that such cultural, economic and weaponized clashes have been experienced (Lewis, 1995). Getting their roots from the history, wars and other types of violent fights still continue today, and with the first quarter of the 21st century, cultural and demographical face of the Middle East is at the blink of a great change.

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Starting in March 2011, Syrian civil war has claimed many lives and caused many people to flee from their countries, on average 11 million people are thought to change places during the five-year conflicts (Rodgers et al., 2016). According to UNHCR's report, among these 11 million, around 2.715.789 are estimated to have fled to Turkey until March 2016 (2016). However, the number of refugees is not indubitable, due to human smuggling and other types of unregistered entrances that cannot be taken under statistical analysis. This indefinite number also brings about uncontrolled, –in some certain cases- illegal and immoral activities towards and/or within the groups of refugees. One of the main aims of this study is to set a realistic image of what is happening at that level, rather than upper-level political acts.

Besides those who have the chance to stay at the camps situated generally around the south border regions of Turkey, there are also some other refugees that choose to stay out of the camps, renting houses, making a decent living, or even establishing their own business. Job opportunities for refugees are limited and they generally are facing some inhumane working conditions, such as very low wages and uninsured works. They are generally hired for manual labor or portage businesses. They are known to be paid less than Turkish citizens and their expenses are as much as the latter. For example, rental prices are reported to skyrocket after the arrival of the refugees, as a result of increasing demand for limited accommodation sources. This study aims to give examples about the job opportunities and payments of the refugees, and their expenses which they need to cover for a living, and thus to create a picture of the current situation in Turkey, considering the fact that there are very few cities in Turkey that do not host Syrians. Moreover, taking the refugee movements between cities of Turkey into account, it is hard to set a decisive number for such statistics.

This study also aims to portray gender and age distribution amongst Syrian refugees so that a clearer view of the ongoing cultural exchange rates can be created. So far, it has been seen that Syrian refugees are targeted with some harsh racist discourse and disinformation especially on social media. This discourse is expected to play a role on the development of a group reaction from the refugees. Also, according to UNHCR (2016), Syrians in Turkey consist greatly of the age group from 0 to 17 whose number is more than the rest of the age groups. The ages mentioned are the years that an individual builds his/her identity, and a trauma is highly expected, simply because they are under seriously racist discourse, lack of ideal job opportunities (i.e. doctor, teacher, engineer, lawyer, etc.) and shortage of necessary educational opportunities. When Turkish government announced that Syrian refugees would benefit from university education without entrance exams, they became a target of criticism from opposition and public.

Under the current socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions with gender problems, Syrians, consisting mainly of young individuals, are expected to build a new identity which does comply neither with the Syrian nationality, nor with that of Turkish. The presumption reflected in this study is that this newly built Syrian identity may bring about an emergence of a new clique, which is constantly exploited by the petit bourgeoisie despite any efforts to be made by the governmental organs. With the racist discourse and activities towards Syrians who are also the victims of inflated expenses caused by land owners and other types of

manipulators, they may build a group that has even a greater reaction to racist factors mentioned. Also, assimilated group within this clique may continue to be exploited; considering that half of the refugees are reported to be women, the burden they carry will be multiplied with gender inequality and sexual abuse which have been experienced by other immigrant communities as well (see Khater, 2001, p. 72).

Job Opportunities of Syrian Refugees

When migration is taken into account, there is a common tendency for “*informal sector*” which constitutes an off-record, often times illegal, but –for the exploiters– highly profitable areas of working (Light, 2000). Scope of this study is limited to the refugees who currently dwell in İstanbul, and relies on the possibility that they will continue to do so which, as an idea, has been fortified by the latest discussion about Syrians’ rights to citizenship. In the observatory field research held in İstanbul, it has been seen that some of the Syrians started their own businesses which especially aim at the Syrian customers. However, some Syrians have been observed to work for the enterprises owned by both Syrians and the Turkish in return for salary, too. So many children and women have been observed to beg in public places like bus terminals and main squares. There are some reports about Syrian refugee employment without insurance opportunities. Especially women refugees are reported to be forced to do prostitution, or at least they are asked to engage in arranged marriages which are performed in return for a particular amount of money.

In terms of Syrians’ current economic situation, they are conceived to be in a disadvantaged position, in that they have a limited array of job opportunities, they earn less, and they need to choose a job that is not in accordance with their qualifications.

A very similar class emergence was experienced in Turkey almost four decades ago when Turkish peasants started to move to big cities. Their job opportunities were closely akin to those of Syrians today. Turkish peasants were openly lower class and the cultural amalgam caused by this was simply within a parallelism with what should be expected from this new class of Syrians. The new identity and a new class as a result of this identity had appeared; and this affected the whole dynamics of urban culture in Turkey simply because those people were the creators of the Turkish suburban culture, and they were employed in lower class occupations such as house cleaning or street trading. There is a clear analogy between this domestic migration and Syrian political migration is based on many factors including but not limited to the economic status; today’s Syrian refugees are employed with a salary lower than legal minimum wage and without insurance opportunities which are compulsory for the employers in Turkey. All in all, it would not be so utopian to expect Syrian migrants to create a new culture through the blended identities of themselves, and directly or indirectly affect the current Turkish culture layers. Also, their lower-class status can be expected to bring a novel image of Turkish identity and culture as high-class, elite, or -more dangerously- exploiter.

Gender Issues in Syrian Refugee Crisis

According to UNHCR (2016) results, nearly half of the Syrian refugees consist of women, and according to the report of International Medical Corps and Care (2014) women are listed amongst the most vulnerable groups. There are many media reports showing that many Syrian women are forced to marry as a *kuma*, the second or third wife of a male (Balyemez, 2016). This *kuma* tradition causes women to be inferior within an already disadvantaged social layer, simply because *kuma* tradition has been in practice for a very long time especially in the eastern part of Anatolia which has been causing women to receive a lower status compared to an average male.

Balyemez (2016) also states that fixed marriages of young female children have become a kind of sector. According to Dorman (2014), the rate of marriage at an early age is more common in Turkey than in Syria. Families permit such marriages due to their unfortunate economic conditions and also have a chance for family settlement in Turkey, and this situation avoids many Syrian young women from reaching to facilities and services including but not limited to education (ibid.).

There are many media reports about forcing Syrian women to prostitution and sexual harassment (Sabah, 2016; Milliyet, 2014; Haberler.com, 2014). Apart from the exploitation of Syrian women as sex slaves, they are also made victims of sexual assault not only coming from the outsiders; but from the Syrian males who try to take advantage of them as well. Just like many other problems, also in the root of this problem lie the economic reasons, in that many Syrian women struggle to make a living for themselves and their children. In many cases, it is seen that many women have come to Turkey leaving behind their husbands, or their husbands are severely injured and not able to work.

There are some other Syrian women who go begging or do housework. Income gained through begging is not generally adequate for keeping a family of four, especially with the current Syrian image under the effect of racist discourse developing through social media. Also job opportunities in the area of housekeeping is limited, and again due to the current false Syrian image causes people not to employ Syrian women for this job. All in all, it would be righteous to claim that Syrian women unfortunately hold a secondary position within Syrian refugee community which already holds similar rank in the society that they build up with their Turkish convergence.

Formation of New Syrian Identity Under the Effect of Racist Discourse

When two –or more- social entities get close to each other, a cultural interaction is, if not inevitable, highly possible. Kaya (2015) divides these interactions into two in terms of their possible outcomes which are binding processes, which focus on cooperation, adaptation and internalization; and separatist processes which involves conflicts, opposition and competition (p. 270). Judging by the news and the reactions towards news, it could be anticipated that current inclination is towards the latter which has for a very long time been made through comparisons between economically disadvantaged Turkish people and so-called high-end opportunities provided to Syrian refugees. For example, many Turkish small business owners have emphasized their ‘disturbance’ from having a Syrian rival who does not pay

taxes. On the other hand, it is claimed that Syrian refugees are employed with half the cost of their Turkish counterparts considering the fact that they do not ask for high salaries and insurances. All in all, a competition and thus opposition have naturally developed between Turkish and Syrian people living close to each other, and this constitutes a separatist interaction that materializes itself in racist discourse.

Turkish government has recently announced that they are planning to confer citizenship to Syrian refugees. Both mainstream and social media have taken this issue as a hot topic; and this naturalization process has been reacted with some approval and some harsh criticism depending on which side media body stands upon. For example, *Akşam Daily* reflected this process as “3 Million Fresh Hope”, while *Sözcü Daily* did so with the title “Will You Naturalize These³?” Apart from these insulting and racist discourse patterns that Syrians are currently facing, they are also victims of social media defamation, too. For example, as a reaction to a video released in the first half of July 2016 which shows Syrians having a beach party by playing loud music and chanting ‘Syria!’. Many Turkish people have made this a kind of justification for their racist discourse. Many ask the question about why and how they can have fun while there is a war in their home country. In addition, another social media defamation about Syrians are spreading around claiming that a certain amount of money is dedicated to a stoppage for Syrian refugees which have not been confirmed in the review with the government officers.

According to UNHCR reports, majority of Syrian refugees are children or young adults (2016); as a result of this, it would be highly probable to see Syrians develop a new identity under the effect of current racist discourse. This new identity can be aggressive and rivaling towards the image of Turkish people with whom they may need to share a habitat. On the other hand, Turkish people may suffer from this situation, too; because, assuming that they need to share a habitat, they will have to create a new culture and identity together. Such racist discourses and attitudes were seen to have devastating effects on both moving and receiving societies during the migrations towards Europe (Yılmaz, 2008). Rather than this racist language and attitudes, it would be more beneficial to deploy more binding interactions; and media should first be meticulous about lexical choice, and if possible, it should initiate an incentive discourse towards collaboration.

Findings and Reflections

After leaving their homes in Syria, Syrian refugees are in danger of having an identity loss. Economist (2014) reports that Syrian refugees are at the blink of a bureaucratic trauma as they have left their documentation behind. Turkey has given temporary identity cards upon their statements which mean no more than saving the day. More importantly, Syrian refugees are undergoing a migratory identity formation process as a result of which they are neither Syrian any more, nor Turkish. This cultural and identity amalgam may bring about similar trauma that at different times in history the Jewish, the Balkan, the Turkish, and even Anglo-Saxons experienced and suffered from.

³ Use of the equivalent of the word ‘these’ (= bunlar) for people is an obvious insult in Turkish language.

Another dreadful probable scenario is that Syrians may turn into a clique and create their own closed culture without much interaction with the surrounding communities. One of the most accelerating factors is the current racist attitude towards them. This racist talks and attitudes may lead Syrians to define themselves as 'the other'. This undesired outcome may follow the historical steps of Gypsy population dwelling almost all over Turkey. Just like Gypsies, Syrians may fall into a formation of a new ethnicity-based exploited and excluded class.

In a very broad sense, economic reasons lie under many problems that Syrians and the Turkish are experiencing. Many Syrians, especially women, are simply trying to survive in the harsh economic conditions in Turkey. Being a refugee should not mean to get lost in a different battle for life as a sex or house worker at the edge of a society by working way less than adequate upon holding a life which is exploited (Balyemez, 2016); being a refugee requires adaptation and constituting an earned value for the society that they live in.

All the actors, both inside and outside of the European Union and their media branches should develop a binding interaction through a careful choice of words and statements. Cooperative, collaborative, and constructive devices should be devised to overcome this refugee crisis. The only way to achieve this goal is to establish a mutual understanding.

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