

SYRIANS IN TURKEY: A GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVE

90 percent of the 2.7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey are living in urban areas throughout the country, and are grappling with the challenges of building meaningful lives for themselves, even as their future remains uncertain. While the refugee crisis has overwhelmed policymaking at the national level, through grassroots initiatives, people who have been displaced by the war in Syria have begun to find the support and resources that they need. In this article, the author draws upon her personal experience working for one such initiative – a community and education center called Small Project Istanbul (SPI) in Fatih – to comment on the reception of Syrian refugees in Istanbul, the particular challenges women and children face, and the necessity for Turkish society to get more involved in civil society activities.

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Since 2011, the world has watched as the once proud and attractive Syria descended into a state of profound conflict. The scale of impact this tragedy is having on Syrian society is immeasurable, although the statistics tell us it is the worst humanitarian crisis in modern history, with the highest number of displaced people globally since World War Two. As the world becomes ever more connected, developed, and self-aware, how can we make sense of such far-reaching catastrophe?

There is no logical sense underlying a world in crisis. Yet the reality remains, and once you acknowledge and internalize this reality, action must be taken – not necessarily action that will challenge and rectify the fundamental issues which caused the crisis, but at least small-scale grassroots actions that can still change lives.

Since 2013, Karyn Thomas has been directing a grassroots initiative she founded, called Small Projects Istanbul (SPI). After being forced to flee Damascus herself in 2012, Karyn felt driven to channel her energies towards helping her Syrian network to re-establish themselves in Istanbul, where she had also decided to resettle. It has grown from there, into what is now an officially registered Turkish NGO. I myself became involved in 2014, and since July 2015 I have been working full time as co-director running SPI's Community Education Center in Fatih, Istanbul. Given the immense scale of the conflict, the community service work we are doing is a tiny drop in a stormy ocean – but for those who dwell in the neighborhood and frequent the center, this small project is making all the difference. Each week, approximately 250 individuals pass through our doors to participate in language courses, handicraft workshops, computer classes, and social support activities, or simply to have lunch and socialize with their peers. Our network at SPI includes a mix of Syrians who live in the neighborhood, Syrians who travel across Istanbul to facilitate classes for their peers, and Turkish and international volunteers who teach, coordinate, and connect with one another to bring together our projects in support of the Syrian families rebuilding their lives in this area.

Our initial focus was primarily on children, and whilst it has grown from there to effectively include all demographics of the community, children between the ages of five and 15 remain our main target group. Our children's program is grounded in providing and enabling education, both within our own center and by facilitating their return to school. To date, we have been able to provide financial support for over 60 elementary and high school-aged children to continue their schooling, as well as directly help register over 20 children in local Turkish schools. Our vision of "education" is much broader and deeper than simply attending school, as we also aim to provide psycho-social support through a variety of other opportunities

and programs we run. This applies not only to the children's program, but is also essential with the women's and young adults' programs. Though the central focus of the women's group is the handicraft collective for livelihood support, the impact is much more far-reaching than the supplemental income this program can offer. The social connection, opportunity for creativity, personal development, and sense of meaning fundamentally impacts these women's lives.

While there are many of us who work tirelessly to network, fundraise, plan, and implement the projects that SPI is managing, the essence of our work is in the relationships that we have formed and strengthened by working together on challenging yet fulfilling tasks. SPI has been successful thus far because we have taken this seriously, and we have been lucky enough to bring together a wonderful community of individuals who are also willing to invest in one another – and SPI.

“Small-scale grassroots actions may not alter the system, but can still change lives.”

On a personal note, the more I attempt to comprehend a world in which this kind of destruction plays out on our TVs and in our social media feeds, the more I feel conflicted about the human story. Despite all our progress in human rights policy and humanitarian ideals, the actions we tacitly condone by our very own inaction signals to me a world that is now broken. Inaction should not be an option. For now, my work with SPI offers me the best opportunity to reach out and participate in the reconstruction of a different world that I so greatly want to believe in.

Still, the scale of this is unfathomable. What does it mean to have half the population of a not so long ago vibrant society, displaced and devastated? On a macro level, it is the overwhelming destruction of a nation. On a micro level, it is the personal narratives of over 20 million people whose lives and futures have been impacted beyond recognition. I can read about, discuss, and absorb the macro perspective to a certain degree, but at this point and in this place, it is well beyond my capacity to truly touch. However, I can touch a few lives. Everyday, as I spend time with those displaced Syrians – children, women, young men – who choose to come into our center and engage with us, I can see the tiny but very real difference it makes. A significant part of this, I believe, is knowing with certainty that you matter. At its core, this is what we are trying to achieve at SPI, and it requires the sincere and consistent energy and efforts of all those who decide to connect with us, both volunteers and beneficiaries, a distinction which belies the mutuality of beneficial interactions this center has enabled.

Reception of Syrians in Turkey

The reality of displacement goes well beyond the lives of those displaced. Many of us have watched and been deeply affected over the past five years as the entire spectrum of Syrian society have been challenged to their core and consequently made their way out into the world to try and find a new and safe place to call home. The process of migration, including forced migration, impacts the host society as much as the migrants themselves. A different kind of renegotiation and adaptation is required. The question now is, how will Turkey respond?

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The way in which a nation and its state system are able to adapt, accept changes, and integrate newness into their society is reflected in many aspects. It is shown not only in the legislation of the governing bodies, in the public consciousness, in the angle of representation of the media sources, and in the activities of civil society groups, but also on a private scale such as in neighborly interactions, in classrooms, and in private discussions between friends. In all of our social processes and interactions, both consciously and subconsciously,

we challenge and/or absorb change into our public spaces and private lives. Whether we welcome the inevitability of change with open hearts and a sense of confidence, or whether we deny and refuse change (and in the process deny space and legitimacy to those we share our streets and our schools with), is part of what defines us as humans.

Confronted by the change Turkey is now facing, what will the reality be in the years to come for the nearly four million Syrians integrating themselves in society? As a foreign observer, I find myself with limited contextual awareness and am not in a position to examine the way this process has developed in Turkey over the years – instead of ; the only Turkey I know is this one. Most of my personal networks here are within the Syrian and other expatriate communities, and only to a limited degree do I follow mainstream and alternative Turkish media. What I feel I can speak about, however, is the social and media rhetoric that I have become so familiar with through my work, and my perspectives on the options that lay ahead for the future of societal relations in Turkey.

The direction that Turkish public sentiment takes on this issue is clearly influenced by the broader political context of the country. We are all painfully aware of what this currently means. The evolution of societal relations will surely be impacted by the development and implementation of government legislation towards Syrian nationals, as well as the way that these policies are being justified in the media and enforced through state institutions. In a context where many Turks may not come to know the refugee community personally, much public awareness will be formed by how the media chooses to represent Syrians, how they will analyze and validate policy formation, and which aspects of the changes taking place in Turkish society they focus on and represent. It is within this environment of uncertainty and disconnection that Turkey and its citizens must bring themselves to develop a positive view towards their new Syrian neighbors.

In Fatih, where SPI is located, I see this play out in a number of ways. We are fortunate enough to have a receptive and welcoming community, which has allowed us to expand our center in numerous ways. Nonetheless, we still regularly witness the difficulties of what it means to be Syrian – and Syrian friendly – in Istanbul. Too often have I held the hand of a disheartened and frustrat-

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ed Syrian woman as she recounts a recent exchange in which she was mistreated, in some way belittled, or harassed in her own neighborhood. Either at the hands of a neighbor, a stranger, or a representative of a bureaucratic system she simply cannot manage to access. These individual experiences combine to create the macro dynamic that is both being experienced and represented as the evolving social relations between the Syrian and Turkish communities.

More and more I find myself frustrated by the limited representations and public awareness of the full spectrum of issues at hand. I can feel the views that have been forming these past five years solidifying, which have now become deeply ingrained into the social consciousness.

The “Lost Generation” in Perspective

In relation to Syrian children, what I see this to mean is the way in which they are generalized and represented as lost and powerless, living on the streets of Istanbul selling tissues. Whilst this is a serious and devastating part of the reality, it is not the

entirety, and imagining it as such is in itself damaging. The concept of the “lost generation” has become standard, which is falsely intended to reflect and encompass the experience of being a child of Syrian nationality in this era. The genuine and deep need for political and social reaction to the untold number of families and children struggling to exist on the streets is a central part of the crisis, but it is not what I wish to focus on here. What I want to draw attention to is the power and impact of our ideas about and representations of the community we are discussing.

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In the same way that we all, as individuals, slowly form our understandings of ourselves and our place in the broader social context throughout our lives, we must be aware that we are, right now, a powerful part of the group who will impact the formation of the identities of the “lost generation” of Syrian children that are currently growing up in Turkey. These children will grow up with not only the trauma of having experienced war. How they grow up to be will also be a reflection of how they are dis-

cussed, represented, and treated in Turkey.

It is true that future prospects for their successful social development and access to education thus far are certainly far from ideal, as many children have spent years out of school and experienced challenging and most likely traumatizing events. Policies towards Syrians and bureaucratic barriers continue to exacerbate the situation, as families struggle to settle down and move forward. However, if we continue to focus solely on the obstacles, the difficulties, and the failures, we may forget to recognize the successes and – more importantly – to work together to find solutions and implement practical ideas to create a better future.

If Turkey and the rest of the world spend the next 10 years telling these Syrian children that they are “lost,” what are the chances that they develop a strong sense of confidence in themselves and believe in their future?

Concluding Remarks

What I see in my daily interactions with this community of Syrian children, families, and young adults is a deep spring of energy, resourcefulness, and resilience. Despite

the multitude of opportunities that have been lost, many new ones have been gained, and with the right attitude and social support, there is real hope that these children can grow up to be successful, well-adjusted, and valuable contributors, to their own community and to the broader Turkish society.

We do not only learn about life in the classroom. Lessons in math and history that we miss when we are six or 16 can be replaced with life lessons that we can learn only if we are provided with a nurturing and safe environment from which to interpret and understand our experiences. I believe the best we can do at present, is to be the basis of that nurturing, safe, and supportive environment for Syrians who have settled in Turkey. For the Turkish nationals with doubts, I urge them to be the voice of reason that challenges fear and believes in a future for Turkey that views its Syrian neighbors with compassion. This is not only for the benefit of their disadvantaged peers but for their own benefit as well, as it is the reflection of a secure, empathic, and well-adjusted society.

Casting our eyes across many historical examples of nations which have struggled to integrate migrant populations effectively into their societies makes the difficulties all too apparent. However, this situation is not optional, and the outcome will affect all those who wish to continue to call Turkey home. Unquestionably, we live in an era of intense globalization, which entails human migration and confrontations. If Turkey can navigate this openly and thoughtfully, the benefits will be manifold, although it will be a difficult and challenging process. What will be more painful though, is the society Turkey will be left with if we do not accept and welcome these changes; if we do not accept and welcome these people; and if we do not work with them and for them, and encourage them to do the same.

Certainly, changing our attitudes and representations of the Syrian community in this country will not solve the humanitarian crisis itself, but it will be a start on a long road to recovery. It must of course be coupled with lobbying for reform in legislation relating to Syrians, and indeed all those who are seeking safety within Turkish borders. To the extent possible, Turkish society must engage directly in civil society activities, and through all of this, take a hard look at how Turkey sees and understands itself. Turkey, and those who care about its social progress, cannot afford to act any other way.