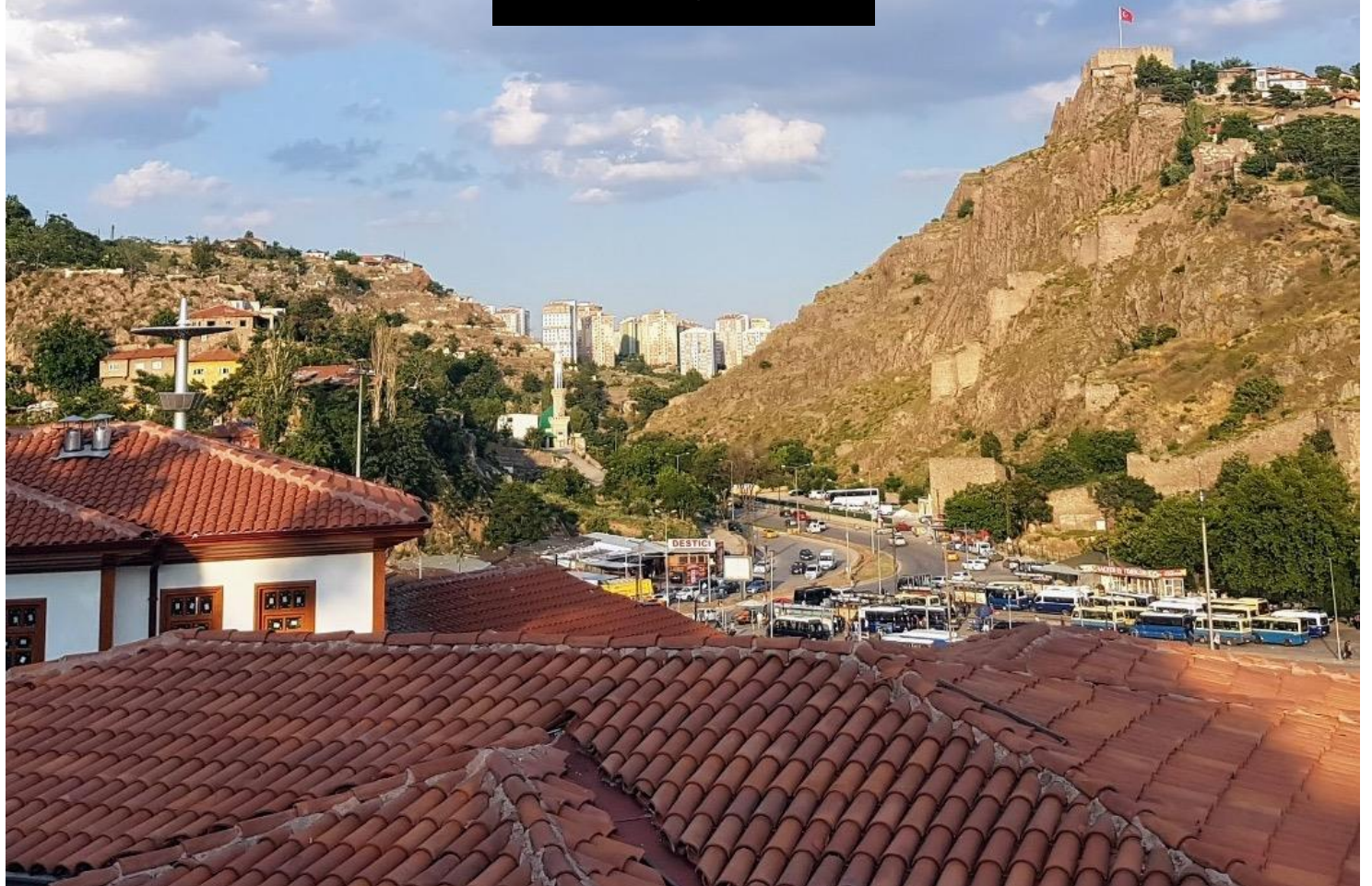


Precarity and the Sustainability of Livelihoods

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Ankara, Turkey

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Cover photo: Ankara Castle with one of the main minibus hubs below (Ulus). Photo by the author.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the many refugees of Ankara who helped me with my research but who have chosen to remain anonymous. Without their help, this report would not have been possible.

Introduction

It seems that the lives of the refugees living in Ankara have devolved into a constant negotiation, a duet between voices of welcome and voices of differential treatment from the larger society in Turkey. In this uncertain environment, refugees have been pushed into recurring cycles of starting and stopping of opportunities to sustain their communities. This precarity has pushed them into the bottom of society in terms of space and employment. Turkey currently hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees in the world, which has put significant pressure on Turkey's economy and institutions, as there is no precedent for such a significant migration in recent Turkish memory (Erdoğan 2019). This pressure has changed the perception of many with regard to the refugees: from people exhausted from the perils of war to a threat to the urban fabric.

This case report looks into the lives of primarily Syrian refugees, as well as some Iraqi and Iranian refugees, living in Ankara, focusing on the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods near the Siteler factory district, and on neighboring districts and the city center. I explore how the informal, precarious nature of the refugees' status in Ankara manifests in their daily lives and livelihoods. I try to shed light on the difficulty of their lives from their perspective. What is most concerning is the in-between status that often puts them into situations in which they are exploited for their cheap labor.

The Author's Position in Ankara

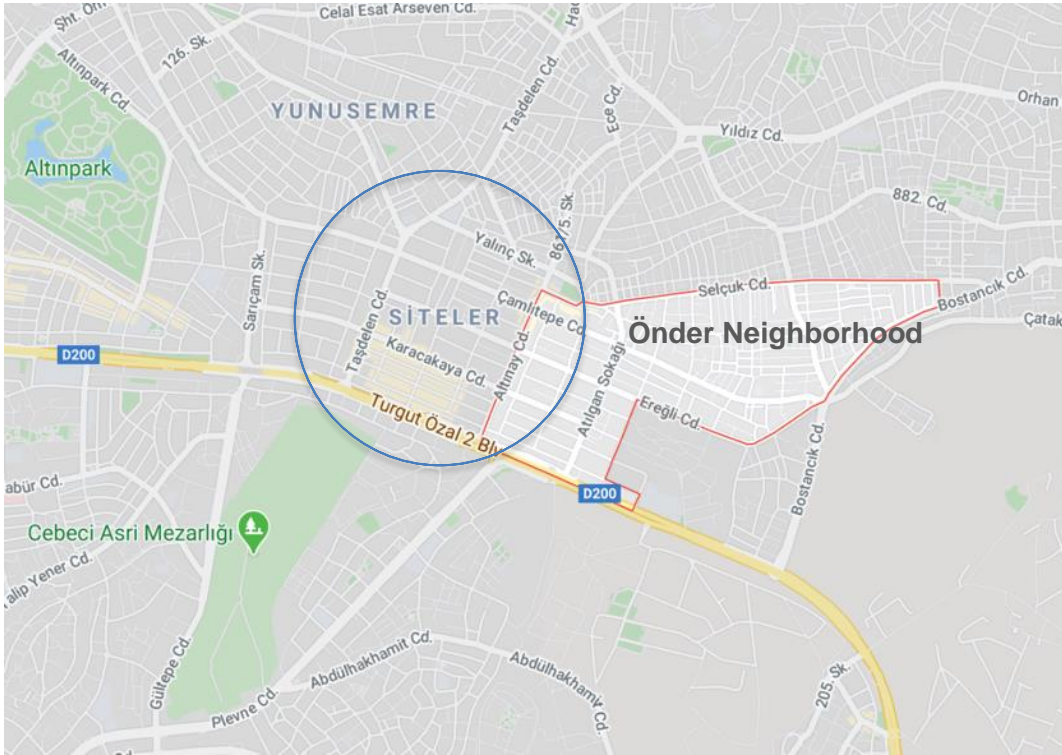
I originally come from the United States and have been living in Turkey for more than six years. I have lived close to the primary refugee areas for a long time and am familiar with some of the neighborhood residents. Many local shopkeepers know me, and for this research they were glad to help me and introduce me to others. I was able to build a network of refugees using the "snowball effect:" one person would introduce me to another and so on. In addition, as a foreign student in Ankara I am acquainted with other foreign students here and have met refugees in this way.

I primarily spoke Turkish with the refugees. The majority of them had lived in Turkey for six years by the time I spoke with them for this report, and our language skills were at a similar level. However, given that Turkish wasn't their primary language, I could not be sure that I understood their stories and feelings exactly as they meant them. A few refugees could speak English. I recognize that as a native speaker, there is the possibility for a power imbalance in these interviews, and I always gave interviewees the option of speaking through a translator or in Turkish. Some refugees did not speak either English or Turkish, so friends or other refugees helped translate their responses.

What drew me to this topic of insecurity and its effects on livelihood chances is that I have also experienced similar difficulties, although not to the same extent. I don't think my position restricted my ability to talk honestly with refugees, except in two aspects. Being male often restricted my ability to speak to refugee women about women's issues, although not always. As a non-Muslim, I was not able to go as deeply into issues relating to religion as I would have liked. Because of these limitations, I focused on my common ground with the refugees, and the topic that they seemed to be the most open to speaking about: informality and its effect on work lives.

Location





Map data ©2019 Google

The appendices of this report contain more information on refugees in Turkey and Turkish refugee policy. For other examples of Turkish cities integrating refugees, see the [RIT report on Sultanbeyli](#) and the [RIT report on Izmir](#).

Mapping the Refugee Population

Ankara is the capital of Turkey and the second-largest city in the country, with a population of approximately 5.5 million people. Turkey has previously acted as a springboard for refugees to continue on to Europe. However, since the signing of the EU-Turkey deal on March 20, 2016, the route into the EU for the refugees has been mostly blocked (İçduygu and Millet 2016, 13). I was told by many refugees that the path to Europe has recently become much more dangerous and almost impossible to use. Since 2016, the number of refugees in the larger cities of Turkey has increased significantly, and work, as well as housing, has become difficult for refugees to find. Ankara was not one of the main destinations for refugees when they first started coming to Turkey, so it initially received relatively few refugees compared to the other larger cities in Turkey (Istanbul, Izmir, and Bursa, for example). Recently, many refugees have moved to Ankara to find work and housing (Artar 2018), and Ankara has become a home for refugees searching for a longer-term residence, rather than being merely a place from which to move on to somewhere else.

In Ankara, most Syrian refugees have moved to the Altındağ Municipality in Northeast Ankara near the Siteler factory district, and specifically to the Önder neighborhood, because it has cheap housing close to factories in Siteler where most refugees work (Bakioğlu 2018, 40; Kavas and Kadkoy 2018). Refugees are also starting to live in the Ulubey district, next to Önder. Within Önder, Selçuk Street has the heaviest concentration of Syrian shops, leading many people to call it *Küçük Halep*, or “Little Aleppo” (Eraydın 2016, 4). To avoid the difficulty of life in Önder and Ulubey, some Syrians are moving to the central parts of Ankara, specifically Kızılay and Ulus, which have large foreign populations.

Mixed Experiences

Many Syrians mentioned common cultural bonds with the larger Turkish society, especially with regard to religion. Three Syrian refugees working in a spice shop told me they prefer to live in Ankara rather than in Germany because there are Muslims in Ankara and it is more similar to Syrian culture, as both peoples were in the Ottoman empire for hundreds of years. Turkish residents of Ankara also alluded to this bond during my research. A 34-year-old Syrian refugee said, “Here, there are so many Syrians and mosques. You can see all the mosques. Here, women can wear the veil or headscarf and not be looked at strangely.” A 26-year-old Syrian refugee told me, “We are all Muslim brothers... Muslims are the true brothers.” In my experience, it appears that an informal bond has been forged between the more religiously devout sections of the Turkish population and the refugees. I often observed more conservative Turkish people going out of their way to welcome the refugees and help them with their challenges. Syrian business owners I spoke to said they depended on Turkish helpers, and Turkish people often came by while I was with refugees to check in on them to be sure they had not experienced any problems. The Turkish people I spoke to often mentioned the necessity to help the refugees and welcome them as they are fleeing from the war, saying that they aren’t that different from Turkish people. One respondent stated, “As Syria was historically Ottoman land, we see Syrians like our own people.”

However, some Turkish people view the refugees differently and believe it may be better for them not to live in Turkey long term. Some refugees told me about negative experiences. A 29-year-old Iraqi refugee said someone stopped him on the street to say that he hated him because he was foreign. A 33-year-old Iranian refugee woman said that when she and her daughter went to the *pazar* (bazaar) to buy fruit, “A woman got in a fight with the man who had sold me fruits saying he shouldn’t sell fruits to us. She said, ‘This is not their land. They can go to their home and buy fruits.’” Nevertheless, Turkish people defended her, criticizing the woman for speaking out against the shopkeeper. In Ankara, the refugees are both welcomed and discriminated against. I noticed that the groups most welcoming to refugees tended to be the more religious, the

more educated, and Turkish minorities. What makes the situation especially difficult is the vulnerability of the refugees that comes with their uncertain legal status, or their lack of full refugee status. This precarity makes negative experiences feel more intense than they otherwise would.

Precarious Livelihoods

When I asked about issues they were facing, most refugees brought up finding work, unfair treatment at work, and the struggle to pay their bills. In Turkey, there is the possibility of a stipend for refugees as a result of the deal between the EU and Turkey in March 2016, which included funding for an Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN). This stipend provides 120 liras monthly (15.72 USD as of August 24, 2020) for refugees with an appropriate level of “destituteness” (Erdoğan 2019, 13). As of September 2019, this support was provided to 39% of the 3.6 million officially registered refugees in Turkey (Erdoğan 2019, 14). However, the ESSN requires that those who receive funding do not work, and this requirement puts refugees living in cities like Ankara in a difficult situation, as 120 liras is not nearly enough to live on. We must remember that the EU has a responsibility to support Turkey, as Turkey is taking care of the largest number of refugees, many of whom have come from Europe or have been stopped from going there.

Many refugees have to work to make ends meet, usually in the informal sector. In practice, only the direst cases receive the EU’s financial support, and none of the refugees I spoke to were eligible to receive it. A 34-year-old Syrian man said, “You must have many children or some problem to get help...(those people get) only about 100 liras a month. We all have to work...how else can we live?” Syrians with temporary protection can get permission to work, but the requirements to receive this permission are prohibitively high. According to the Turkish Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, 31,185 Syrians had been given a work permit as of March 31, 2019, while Erdoğan estimates that more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees were working (Erdoğan 2019, 12). That means approximately 3% were working legally in March 2019. When asked why so few refugees were working legally, many Turkish residents I spoke to pointed to the EU-Turkey deal. In the original agreement, the EU was to provide 6 billion euros before the end of 2018, but by March of 2020, Turkey had not received even half of that amount (Hatip 2020). At the same time, crossings of refugees from Turkey to the EU have decreased by 97% (Hatip 2020). This reduction has greatly stressed the Turkish economy, which now must absorb the refugees previously going to Europe but has not been given sufficient economic assistance to do so. Many believe that if adequate funds had been provided and the EU had taken more refugees, the situation would be different.

Some business owners prefer to hire Syrians informally to bypass work permit fees, minimum salary requirements, and minimum social security requirements (Bache 2020). Moreover, the number of refugees in a workplace cannot be more than 10% of the number of Turkish workers in the same workplace (İçduygu and Millet 2016, 5; Erdoğan 2019, 12). This possibility of work exists only for Syrian refugees; Iraqi and Iranian refugees face a more complex process to get work permission, and many work illegally to sustain themselves. Regardless of nationality, many refugees I spoke to were in precarious situations, with little guarantee of either safety or wages being paid at all because of their lack of a work permit.

Another outcome of the difficulty in getting a work permit is that many refugees have had to work in positions significantly below their previous experience and certifications. Syrians who are doctors or educators have to fill many requirements to transfer their certifications (Bache 2020, 16). One 37-year-old Syrian shop owner received his finance degree in Syria and was a banker in a senior position there; in Ankara, he runs a phone shop. A 28-year-old Syrian shop owner with a university degree opened his perfume shop to help his family survive. A 29-year-old Iraqi refugee has an engineering degree, but in Turkey he works as a waiter. When I asked about his college education, a bit of tension escaped his otherwise stoic expression. Like many others I interviewed, his eyes conveyed the burden of his un-lived life.

Refugees who work in the factories often face underpayment and long shifts. Some of my respondents reported receiving either 200 liras a week (25.99 USD as of August 23, 2020) or 50 liras a day (6.50 USD) and working long hours. One 29-year-old Syrian man told me his two brothers were currently working 14-hour days in factories for 50 liras per day. A refugee working in a restaurant said he worked from 8:00 am until midnight every day and was being paid 50 liras. He could only miss work “once every couple of months” if it was a special occasion. Turkish citizens who work at his restaurant made 2–3 times more than non-Turkish employees and were working half the hours. A 32-year-old Syrian man told me that when he first came to Ankara, he started working in the factories from 7:30 am until 6:00 pm daily with no off days and was paid 200 liras weekly. After a year, he opened his own shop with his savings. None of the refugee factory or restaurant workers I spoke to had any kind of work permit that I was aware of.

The lack of legal work status means many refugees work in unsafe conditions. Many spoke of how they are pushed to work fast without concern for their safety and are at risk of not being paid on time or at all. One 47-year-old Iranian woman stated, “If you work here illegally, they (employers) don’t pay you, and you cannot go complain about it because no one listens to you.” Some workers I spoke to said they had been dismissed without notice and with no back pay. Many worried that their children or brothers would be next in line to have to work in factories. A 2019 report said the rate of refugee children attending school in Turkey declined as children got

older, from 90% in primary school, to 57% in grades 5–7, and to 27% in grades 9–12 (Erdoğan 2019). A 23-year-old Syrian man told me that many Syrian boys in his brother’s middle school have left to work in the factories and that he was fearful his brother would go too. Although refugees spoke of educational opportunities open to them in Ankara, for both children and adults, they reported difficulties in taking advantage of these opportunities. The most common reason was being too busy with work.

Önder as a Refugee Neighborhood



Figure 1. Images from the more industrial part of the Önder neighborhood. Photos by the author.

The mood in the streets of Önder is of both tension and exhaustion. The buildings are partially destroyed and abandoned, as the neighborhood had originally been intended for redevelopment.¹ See Figure 2. As shown in the photos, few new buildings have been built and housing, though cheap, has been difficult to fill. As refugees began to work in the factories of Sıteleler, many relocated from other neighborhoods to Ulubey and Önder seeking cheap housing or landlords who were more open to renting to refugees than in other neighborhoods. They were less concerned about the uncertain status of their location, as their status was also uncertain.

Refugees chose Önder because it was close to small furniture manufacturers in Sıteleler: “the residential and industrial areas are intertwined” (Kavas and Kadkoy 2018, 6). They relied on informal networks to find housing. Önder and Ulubey are now predominately Syrian neighborhoods. Some landlords took advantage of the situation, requiring higher rent and providing less building maintenance. During a discussion with two refugees, water began dripping from the ceiling of their business. When I asked what they would do about it, one

¹ The municipality of Altındağ where Önder is located declared Önder an “urban regeneration area” in July 2015. As of 2017, 2,150 buildings had been demolished, and approximately 6,000 people relocated themselves to other districts (Kavas and Kadkoy 2018, 5). See also Mazlumder 2015, cited in Eraydın 2016.

shrugged his shoulders and looked away, saying there is nothing that can be done. When asked how much repairs would cost, they both laughed and said, “Too much.”

Önder has become inhabited by mostly Syrians, followed by Iraqis and some other foreigners. A 28-year-old Syrian shop owner said people in the neighborhood are mostly from Aleppo. A 49-year-old Iraqi said, “It is not only Syrians in Önder, also many Iraqis...It is all mixed up...we are all Sunni and *mülteci* (refugee). We also share the Arabic language.” Despite their difficulties, many refugees seemed to be glad to live in Önder, perhaps even a bit proud. There was an air of communal spirit and a sense that the neighborhood was a place of their own.



Figure 2. Images from the part of the Önder neighborhood with more of a refugee presence. Photos by the author.

Many refugees in Ankara have opened their own shops and restaurants with Turkish partners sympathetic to the plight of the refugees (who put the business in their name as the Syrians couldn't legally do so). I observed shops of all kinds.² A 28-year-old Syrian shop owner said those living in Önder are mostly middle-class refugees, whereas the rich refugees went to the south or to Istanbul to open factories. He explained, “Many Syrians are middle class, but not by Turkish standards. They are lower class by Turkish standards. They are only middle class compared to other Syrians.” The signage on refugee businesses is primarily Arabic, and the products are a mix of Syrian and Turkish ones. However, closer inspection of the Syrian products reveals that most of them were actually made in Turkey. This shows the hidden integration of the refugees. A market owner explained that they were produced by wealthy Syrian refugees who opened factories in Turkey. A 32-year-old Syrian market owner said, “Syrians are good workers and have a natural entrepreneurial spirit. Everything is against us here; we have no money, no real papers, we don't know the language, but we still make this

² I have chosen not to include images of the Syrian shops in an effort to protect the shop owners. They professed to me that they had experienced harassment in the past as a result of journalists who had published stories about them and included images of their businesses.

community and businesses here. We came with nothing, all of us, and we built this with our cleverness.”

Although some believe that Syrian shops are illegal, I found rather that they are in a legal grey area. Several refugee shop owners told me they were paying taxes and reporting their sales through Turkish partners. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that all of the businesses are completely legal. The majority fell somewhere on a spectrum of legality. The refugee business owners I spoke to expressed no desire to exploit the system, but felt that their situation gave them no choice—they had to bend some of the rules. A 32-year-old Syrian market owner said, “I work until 11 or 12...I have to work like that. There is water, there is electricity, there is gas (bills to pay)...everything is expensive.” A 37-year old Syrian phone shop owner said he pays 2,500 liras for rent (343 USD); sometimes he makes enough to pay the rent, but sometimes he makes much less.

Conclusion

When the refugees spoke about their experiences with the larger society in Ankara, especially the Syrians would hold up their hands, and, pointing to their fingers one by one, they would explain, “One finger might be bad and the other good, you cannot judge the hand based on one finger.” The “hand” in Ankara includes both hospitality and mistreatment, and cannot be judged based on just one of its fingers. This dual welcome and discrimination forces the refugees to depend on the local environment for support because there is not enough systematic help. At the same time, their informality causes them to be exploited by the same environment that they depend upon. Turkey has spent over 40 billion dollars on refugees as of March 2020 (Hatip 2020). It is hard to say how sustainable this expenditure is without other countries, for example EU countries, sharing more of the burden.

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Appendix A: Methodology

For the purposes of this report, I spoke with 45 refugees in Ankara, mostly centered around the refugee neighborhoods of Ulubey and Önder, which are attached to the Siteler factory district. However, I also spoke to refugees facing similar conditions of precarity in nearby areas of Ankara. The majority of the people I spoke to were Syrians from Aleppo. However, there were others from other major cities of Syria, Iran, and Iraq. I experienced some difficulty contacting the female refugee population, especially Syrians, as they live in tight-knit, conservative communities. The gender balance of the refugees I spoke to was 8 women to 37 men. The age range was from 18 to 57 years old. I conducted informal, unstructured interviews and also used participant observation. In addition, I drew on my general experiences in the neighborhood and in Ankara. I recognized the inherent power relations at stake in the interview process and the ability of the researcher to affect what he or she is researching. By allowing the interviewees to steer the conversation, I was able to see what issues naturally came out as the most important to them. These seemed to center around difficulties they faced in their work lives. The only question that I asked in every interview was, “If you could send a message to the outside world, and had a voice to tell others about something important to you as a refugee in Ankara, what

would that be?” I found that most of the refugees appreciated this question, as most other researchers had emphasized what the researcher was focusing on or what was important for them to find. With this question, I gave the control of the conclusions over to the refugees.

I also sent a questionnaire to 113 Turkish residents of Ankara, to gauge their views of the Syrians in their city and to try to get both sides of the issue. The gender breakdown of these responses was: 62 male, 47 female, 1 non-binary, and 3 who chose not to reveal their gender. The age range was from 18 to 70 years old. It was much easier to get Turkish people to speak to me openly than it was to get Syrians to do so. One possible explanation is that I speak Turkish quite well, have lived in Turkey for a long time, and am familiar with the culture of Turkey, so Turkish people might feel more comfortable with me than Syrians might. Another explanation is that Turkish people have less to lose from answering such questions. The refugees are in a vulnerable position wherever they go (in Turkey, Syria, or beyond), and could face many problems if it became publicly known that they had said something too “problematic.” I also spoke to 3 people working at non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and 2 professors at universities in Ankara about the topic of refugee integration.

Appendix B: Refugees in Turkey

Turkey hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees. According to the Refugees’ Association (Mülteciler Derneği 2020), the number of Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Turkey was 3,600,710 people as of July 2020. The same report found that 98% of registered Syrian refugees were living in cities. When the refugees originally began coming to Turkey, they settled in the southeast of the country in cities close to Syria. Still today, the majority of Syrian refugees live in cities close to the border with Syria (Hatay, Gaziantep, and Sanliurfa), as well as in Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, and Bursa (Saraçoğlu and Bélanger 2019, 363). One aspect of the refugee situation in Turkey that has been largely overlooked up until now is the large number of refugees who are not Syrian. As of September 2018, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has the total number of non-Syrian asylum seekers at 367,000 and as of August 2019, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) of Turkey estimated the total who had applied for international protection between 2010–2018 to be 478,309 (Erdoğan 2019, 3). According to UNHCR, the top three nationalities of refugees who had applied for international protection by September 2018 were Afghans (170,000), Iraqis (142,000), and Iranians (39,000) (Erdoğan 2019, 5). According to the DGMM, in 2019 the nationalities with the highest numbers given short-term residence permits were: Iraqis (132,262), Turkmen (110,553), Syrians (101,742), and Iranians (55,745). Turkey has become a center for the migration of refugees from many countries and is not solely a route for Syrian refugee migration.

One significant obstacle to refugees in Turkey coming from countries outside of Europe have faced is their lack of legal status as refugees. The Turkish government has ratified the Geneva Convention but with a geographic limitation, meaning that only European refugees are able to attain full refugee status, and non-Europeans are only allowed to stay in the country with temporary protection status (Baban et al. 2017, 41; Erdoğan 2019, 4). Based on this highly uncertain status, many if not most refugees who have some kind of marketable skillset have moved on to Europe in search of better work conditions, better pay, and a more stable status. Erdoğan observed that the approximately 700,000 Syrians who went to Europe between 2014–2016 were those with the highest education levels, leaving behind in Turkey those from rural and traditional regions of Northern Syria who had had very limited access to education (Erdoğan 2019, 8).

As has been noted by İçduygu and Nimer, regardless of any stated desire to return to the northeastern part of Syria, the likelihood of refugees being able to or wanting to return is quite slim (2020, 423–424). As observed by both İçduygu and Millet and myself, the majority of the refugees see their existence in Turkey as long or medium term, with little hope of being able to return to Syria in the near future. Refugees from other countries have expressed to me the growing instability in their home countries as well (Iraq and Iran), making the possibility of their stay becoming long or medium term also likely. According to Erdoğan, the total number of those under some kind of protection in Turkey has grown to more than 5.02% of the total population of the country (Erdoğan 2019, 3). Many of these refugees no longer have a house, a livelihood, or a safe place to return to. When asked if he would return, one 29-year-old Syrian refugee responded, “To where? My house was totally destroyed. Where will I be going to?” The refugee presence in Turkey is a phenomenon that can no longer be relegated to the realm of temporary inconvenience.

Appendix C: Refugees in Ankara

As has been observed in previous reports, when migrants first started to use Turkey as a launching board to move onwards into Europe, the majority moved to Istanbul and Izmir. In my research, I have been told by numerous refugees that it has become much more difficult to get to Europe safely, and jobs have become scarcer in the cities most heavily populated by refugees. Therefore, many refugees have relocated to Ankara in search of work and affordable housing. Ankara is the second-largest city in Turkey, with a population of over 5.5 million. Although it is known as more of a “official” or “legal” city, there are areas of low-cost housing, with some small-scale factories producing cheap goods in the northeast. Most of the refugees relocated to this area in order to find work, or to the center of the city to remain close to other foreigners. According to the Refugees’ Association (Mülteciler Derneği 2020), the number of Syrian refugees under temporary protection living in Ankara as of July 2020 is 97,295, which is 1.7% of

the total population of Ankara, making Ankara 11th in Turkey in terms of its Syrian refugee population. We should be aware, however, that this statistic only counts legally registered Syrian refugees. Kavas and Kadkoy have pointed out that approximately 50% of the refugees living in the Önder district of Ankara are unregistered (2018, 9). In the process of conducting my research, I came across countless Iraqi and Iranian refugees as well, the majority of whom were without status or had a temporary residence permit, with no protection or refugee status. This means that the number of refugees living in Ankara is likely much higher than the official statistic of 97,295.

In the northeastern part of Ankara, Önder is the district with the highest Syrian population, with an estimated population of 4,000 living legally, in addition to large numbers of undocumented refugees (Eraydın 2016, 3). The neighboring Siteler industrial area is the primary employer of the refugees, with approximately 1,000 Syrian refugees working in these factories (Eraydın 2016, 3). I observed that there are also many refugees now living in Ulubey, which abuts Önder district, and in the cheap, central areas of Ankara with high foreign populations (predominately Ulus and Kızılay). The most common nationality among the refugees remains Syrian, but in Ankara there are also significant populations of Iraqi, Iranian, and Afghan refugees, many of whom are in situations of precarity similar to that of the Syrian refugees.

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