

Syrian migrants in Istanbul: guest status, legality and temporality

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As the conflict in Syria continues, the number of Syrian migrants living in Turkey and arriving in Istanbul has steadily grown. Syrian nationals present in Turkey are considered guests rather than refugees by the Turkish state, and while in Turkey Syrian nationals are under the temporary protection of the state. The Turkish state has taken various measures to manage the presence of Syrian migrants/refugees in Turkey. As the state pursues a different approach to Syrian migrants present in Istanbul than it does for those living in the border provinces and state-run camps, my research is concerned solely with the case of Syrian migrants living in Istanbul. By examining Syrian migrants' experiences as 'guests' in Istanbul, I explore the legal framework set up to legalise the presence of Syrian migrants in Istanbul and I address a number of questions. What is it to be Syrian and a 'guest' in Istanbul? How is protection enacted in Istanbul?

In the current phase of this research project, I am focusing on the one-year residence permits being issued to Syrian migrants, as this measure is part of the temporary protection offered to Syrian migrants living outside the border provinces and state-run camps. The residence permits give Syrian migrants access to medical care and educational services in state institutions. Securing a permit is contingent on having entered the country legally, but many migrants came to Istanbul without passports. Beyond the issue of documentation, most migrants are uninformed as to how to benefit from the services available to them and rely on word of mouth to learn about their options.

There have been previous cases where 'guest' status has been granted to people coming to Turkey to flee conflict, the most recent being Chechens coming in the early 2000s; however the access to services in the current case is unprecedented. Thus, since this case study presents nuances regarding Turkey's position towards refugees, migrants and guests, I intend to compare the data I gather with previously published literature on migrants and refugees living in Istanbul. Furthermore, an assessment of the residence permit programme offers an opportunity to compare the experiences of Syrians of different legal statuses as many Syrian migrants live in Istanbul without permits or official documents. I am investigating these research questions through participant observation and interviews undertaken with Syrian migrants living in Istanbul. As part of this endeavour, I am documenting changes experienced by Syrian migrants regarding their legal status in Istanbul and their knowledge of the benefits of their status. I am also seeking out information concerning the state policy from state actors and collecting information available on these issues in the media.



Bread is the essential accompaniment to any meal, and Syrians favour their flat oven-baked bread over any other type. This bread is now being manufactured in Istanbul, with two bakeries having opened in the city. The bread is distributed to the various parts of the city where Syrian migrants live

This research is part of a broader PhD project which I am undertaking as a research student in the Anthropology Department of Goldsmiths College, University of London. In my project, I explore how Syrian migrants in Istanbul mark time, and ask if these practices become modes of making time. I argue that through their socialising, labour and, ultimately, their movement Syrian migrants in Istanbul transform their wait – they make time. Time here is taken as socially constituted through interaction and engagement rather than an assumed measure of change. I examine how Syrian migrants render their presence in transit socially significant. I approach transit in Istanbul as a matter of time rather than the city being a transit space within a migratory trajectory. In this research, I focus on individuals and families who fled Syria as a result of the revolution and travelled to Istanbul as well as Syrian migrants living in Istanbul prior to the revolution in Syria. While many of these people are seeking to travel to Europe to begin a new life there, others maintain the aim of returning to Syria and others still concentrate their energies on creating a future in Turkey.

An assessment of the legal framework determining the presence of Syrian migrants is crucial to understanding the state's approach to these migrants in Istanbul, as well as the ways the migrants remain in the city, as undocumented or as residents, for instance. The migrants' experience of their time in transit is also affected by the legal framework. Moreover, I examine the ways migrants engage with the legal framework, and the benefits available, as part of making their time in transit.