

The Dom of Syria: The “other” refugees

I believe that the current conditions of globalization require us to debate the rights of individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, that is, the rights of the “others.” I will draw on Kant’s essay entitled “Perpetual Peace” to strengthen my argument. Today, as we seem to stand on the verge of global war, the current conditions of globalization correspond to a reality which spans from the “European Constitution” to the increased blurriness of the century-old borders in the Middle East. This reality also points to humanity’s progress towards “days of perpetual peace.”

On the one hand, we witness and experience how the masses “longing for spring” took to the squares to bring down the remnants of dilapidated, dictatorial nation states; and how the bloody retreat of those uprisings evolved into medieval barbarism. Women are now sold on slave markets due to ethnic, religious and political/ ideological differences, children’s dead bodies hit the shores of the Mediterranean, massacres and executions are broadcast live, radicals raised in the Western education system organize serial killings with cold blood in the neighborhoods in which they used to live. On the other hand, the defeated masses, with their hopes exhausted, abandon their homes and lands to reach the borders of Europe, a place they had thought to be the homeland of the concepts of “rights and equality”, and come face to face with the real Europe. On the one hand, the civilized world drops tons of bombs every day on this region, on the other, another region that had lifted its internal borders and wrote equality and justice on its flag confronts the “other.”



The perception of Gadjos

In his articles on being the “other”, living with the “other” and opening up a space for the “other” between different cultures, Jürgen Habermas suggests that “Embracing is not turning on oneself and closing oneself to the other. Embracing the other means keeping the social borders open to everyone—especially to those who are stranger to each other and wish to remain so.” From Kant’s era to the present day, the debates around the concept of nation have necessarily included issues such as inequalities across the globe, human rights and “the rights of the others.”

All of this urges us to ask ourselves whether we will live together with the “other.” The distinction between the other and the local becomes blurred in many times and places. This in a way resembles the ambiguity about the location of the border between the East and the West. Just like every region has its “East,” everyone has an “other.” The most obvious example can be seen in us Gadjos’ perceptions of the Roma people.¹ For centuries, this people has been discriminated against and ostracized across the world.

The Dom people are an ethnic community thought to number around 5 million and live in almost all Middle Eastern countries. They speak the Domari language of the Indo-European language family. Having worked as ironsmiths, tinsmiths, tanners, basketmakers, dentists, circumcisers, musicians and fortunetellers. The Dom are facing employment as these crafts become obsolete.

For hundreds of years, the Dom led a nomadic life in order to perform these crafts and met the neighboring peoples’ demand for work tools, kitchenware, etc. With the increase in population and the development of manufacturing and mass production, they have simply become unable to make a living with their traditional crafts. They had to take refuge in the cities, working there as day laborers or unskilled workers.

The tumultuous political and social life, civil wars and conflicts in the Middle East have rendered daily life increasingly difficult for these people.

Living at “degree zero”

In this era of upheaval, the Dom people suffered significantly, experiencing famine, poverty and all kinds of violence. Discriminated against and othered even in times of peace, these people could not meet their most basic needs such as health, education and shelter, and were very adversely affected by the conflict during civil war although they remained neutral. Obligated to a life at “degree zero,” the Dom were obliged to hit the road, abandoning their makeshift tents and huts. The destruction and violence created by war and civil war has further aggravated their basic problems in terms of social security, shelter, nutrition and health.

The Syrian civil war makes life extremely hard for all the ethnic groups and religious minorities of this country. Today, the Dom who left Syria to take refuge in Turkey state that they are being forced to migrate by both the regime and opponents, and their houses and belongings are being demolished and plundered although they have remained neutral during the four-year conflict.

Among others, Aleppo’s Haydariya neighborhood that was inhabited by the Dom was heavily bombarded from air, leading to countless deaths and forced migration. Especially in regions controlled by radical Islamist groups, whose power has recently increased, the violence against the Dom is on the rise. These groups seize the Dom’s homes and belongings on the pretext that they are not “true Muslims” and subject them to lethal violence.

These groups which base their war effort on religious and sectarian grounds exert increasing violence on groups with different belief systems. Especially groups such as Abdals of the Alevi-Bektashi faith were forced to abandon their homes in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama or Mumbuc due to radical Islamist pressure, and sought refuge in regions under regime control or in neighboring countries where they were obliged to live as nomads. Witnesses state that these attacks lead to death and serious injury, children’s hands are cut off on charges of theft, and women are abducted and subjected to sexual violence.

The Syrian Dom seeking refuge in Turkey state that their relatives who stay behind have had to flee to the western provinces of Latakia and Damascus where conflict and air raids are not as intense, or to the cantons of Afrin, Kobane and Qamishli under Kurdish control. The heavy fighting in the cities and lack of access to health services and nutrition have driven some of these communities to other countries. Nowadays, tens of thousands of asylum seekers try to survive in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq under conditions of famine and poverty.

Refugee camps and the Dom

Dom refugees do not generally stay in refugee camps, and do not want to. The main underlying reasons are the prejudice and discrimination they face from other camp dwellers and the management. Due to the ethnic, religious or political polarization in the camps, limitation of free circulation, tight controls on entry and exit, the feelings of isolation and imprisonment, these groups do not perceive these camps as spaces where they can live freely.

As such, Dom refugees choose to stay in their own tent camps, in makeshift tents, or in derelict or abandoned buildings. Those without a roof sleep on the streets and in parks. Only a handful of families can afford to live together in rented houses. Such houses are mostly located in neighborhoods where local Roma communities live in Turkey. Due to a decree recently issued by the Ministry of Interior, their tents are frequently burnt or torn down. Groups survive on petty jobs they find on a daily basis and have no money for rent; therefore, they are obliged to move frequently. Since they face more pressure in small towns, they choose to migrate to large cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir in order to get lost in the crowd.

The lifestyle of the Dom refugees makes it almost impossible to register their activities. The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), which registers the activities of Syrian refugees in Turkey, either cannot access these groups or is unwilling to register them due to prejudice. Today many members of the community lack the ID cards normally given out to refugees by registration centers. The Dom list the reasons for these as their undocumented passage through the border, lack of information about the registration process or misinformation, and the tendency to avoid state officers.

On the other hand, the members of the community who live in tents or ruins, cannot obtain the certificate of residence which is required for registration. Even those who meet all the criteria are made to wait for no apparent reason, and are sometimes denied their documents. On the other hand, not everyone wants to obtain a foreigner identification card owing to their return to nomadism to find jobs, and the fact that such cards are valid only in the province of issue. Individuals who lack these cards cannot access health services and assistance.

The NGOs' and aid organizations' demands for assistance to these individuals are ignored by officers on the grounds that this would encourage people to live on the streets.

Dom refugees who live in makeshift tents, ask for assistance or work on the streets are always prone to the arbitrary interventions of security forces and become their targets. Dom refugees in Turkey have immense difficulty in finding jobs. They walk the streets with the hope of finding casual work, and collect waste for recycling. When they find a job, they usually have to work very long hours for a very low pay. They are obliged to cede to exploitation. Women and children either peddle small necessities (kleenex, lighters, etc.) or collect food and aid on the streets.

For four years, these refugee groups who try to survive in Turkey despite all these adversities have been discriminated against and othered. What are the reasons for this? NGOs and refugee aid organizations, unfortunately including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, lack information about this community. This renders a 40,000-strong community invisible. Syrian refugees are generally perceived as a homogenous group of Sunnite, Arab individuals; there is some knowledge about relatively larger ethnicities such as Turkmens, Kurds and Circassians, but groups such as the Roma—seen by the remaining groups as the “other”—continue to be ignored, disregarded, ostracized as ever.



Among over two million Syrian refugees in Turkey, there are roughly 40.000 Dom people. They constitute the most invisible and excluded group of all refugees, even within the refugee community itself as well as for the NGOs working with refugees..

The unraveling of communal life

In these communities, dispersed groups and families become vulnerable to all kinds of danger. The Dom communities living in the Middle East are composed of smaller tribes, which are further divided into large families living together. Each group is composed of 5 to 15 families

which in fact lead a communal life. Although they live in separate tents or houses, the tradition of solidarity persists. A leader who directs and orients the group also manages their relations with the outside world.

This communal lifestyle also protects such a self-enclosed society against external threats. Their ancient tradition lives on in this manner. This communal living leads to the virtual absence of the sense of private property, the group's compensation for any individual or familial shortcomings, particularly the protection of children and women, endurance against tough living conditions—in short, the strength to resist assimilation into the social and economic system of Gadjos.

The fragmentation of these relationships in periods of upheaval, such as war and conflict, thrusts individuals and families who are not adapted to living alone into an unknown world. The fragmentation of groups creates tears in the social fabric. Forced to engage with an unknown system in order to find employment, shelter and food, these individuals become vulnerable to danger. Children who sell things on the street, women who ask for help, or men who are willing to do any kind of work easily get tangled up in crime.

Caught between security forces and the media

On the other hand, the media in Turkey tends to cover Dom refugees in a negative way, as “beggars from Syria” or “Syrian Gypsies,” portraying their tough living conditions as their own lifestyle choice. Articles written in this vein fuel further discrimination against Dom refugees. The anti-Syrian sentiment which grips the Turkish society at times is directed mainly at this community, with the encouragement of some media outlets. Unfortunately certain individuals including some spokespeople of Syrian refugees tell the media “These people are Gypsies who were beggars back in Syria. We do not want them; they are not Arabs.” As a result, the society and security forces are mobilized against the community. The Ministry of Interior has issued a decree which orders the “internment of Syrian refugees who beg on the streets.” The decree was sent to the governors’ offices of all provinces, and security forces offered two options to Syrian asylum seekers who live in the streets or in makeshift tents: Either settle down in a refugee camp or rent a house. If they refused to do one or the other, they were to be sent back to Syria. In fact, the Doms were the direct target of this decree. Many governors applied the decree to the letter and authorized the security forces. A witch hunt took place in certain provinces and districts. Children asking for aid on the streets were sent to camps without the knowledge of their families. Individuals and groups who refused to live in AFAD-controlled camps were driven away, forcing some of them to return to Syria despite the ongoing war.

Lots of talk, no legislation

To conclude, the Roma people are the victims of “civil wars” waged by different peoples, ethnic and religious groups with whom they had been living for centuries. During the recent Middle Eastern popular uprisings that started out four years ago, groups of Dom were again caught between the warring sides, as had happened in previous experiences. For centuries, this ancient people carried in their collective memory the massacre and suffering they have gone through in various wars and civil wars, and transmitted these “hard times” to younger generations with the magic of the word. Now, more suffering is inscribed on the hearts of “the world’s free souls.” Tough days await the “others” of the Middle East.

Recent political negotiations, lump sum payments and promises for keeping refugees away from the borders of Europe are yet another indication of the fact that we are still tangled in the nation state mentality. However, did not Kant aspire to days of perpetual peace in a Europe without borders? The events of recent years in the world show us that, in the age of globalization, war is global just like everything else.

What do our governments, those who rule Middle Eastern countries reshaped by the popular uprisings, think about the Roma and other religious and ethnic minorities? As long as their discourse of equality is not translated into concrete legislation, as long as these peoples’ right

to live humanely in “peace and equality” is not guaranteed by law, the multicultural structure of the Middle East and the world is due to degenerate.

1 Gajjo is a term used by Roma people to denote someone who is not Romani, a stranger.