Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | **Vol. 1, Supp. 1, 2016 | Special Issue | eISSN 1857-9760**
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies – Bitola at www.e-jlia.com



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Date of acceptance: April 04, 2016
Date of publication: May 20, 2016
Report (Non Peer-Reviewed)
UDC 325.254.4(4-569.1)(047)

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION

The "refugee crises" emerged as a term created by the European Member States, which had to face the higher number of asylum seekers since the Second World War. In the end of 2015, Europe, led by the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, proclaimed more welcoming policies toward asylum seekers coming from war-zones, in particular Syrians; who were recognized as the most vulnerable and in-need of a safe haven. Despite of this step forward towards an increasing acceptance of refugees, statistics show that the number of Syrians arriving in Europe seeking international protection remains low compared with Syria's neighboring countries, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), between April 2011 and February 2016, Europe received less than one million (972,012) Asylum applications, while in the same period of time, Turkey registered almost three million (2,688,686) Syrian refugees, Lebanon more than a million (1,055,984) and finally, Jordan 637,859. Thus, all European Member States are currently hosting only around 22% of Syrians who are seeking protection, compared to Syria's neighboring countries. Moreover, an aggressive reaction towards refugees welcoming policies coming from strong European Member States' policy makers grew in Europe from the center and right-wing political parties, as well as from radical ideological groups.

Finally, the inability of the European Member States to reach an internal agreement in order to solve and overcome the limitations of the Dublin regulations brought them to seek Turkey's help in order to limit the number of Asylum Seekers reaching the European coasts. The EU signed a controversial agreement with Turkey in March 2016, which had been defined by NGO's, civil society, and European institutions as in contradiction with the European values. In fact, the EU aimed to discourage the influx of Asylum seekers by deporting asylum seekers who reach Greece, in exchange of the same number of refugees who are currently in Turkey. While heads of states negotiate and count numbers in order to achieve agreements, I will uncover personal stories from Syrian asylum seekers who are currently struggling for a dignified life in Turkey and Germany.

Five years of civil war in Syria caused, according to the UNHCR, more than eight million internally displaced persons. In this report I will present stories of Syrians, who I personally encountered, who could successfully escape their devastating civil war in their home country. My aim is to raise the voices of the few courageous young ladies and men,

who could leave behind death and destruction, moved by hope and aspiration to be able to start working and building a new future. Their desired and deserved new stable life is yet far from their present reality. On the one hand, those asylum seekers found themselves having to populate the streets of the biggest Turkish city, Istanbul, in order to collect some money to feed their hunger; Others, among the luckiest ones who could find a job, are constantly worried about their family, relatives and friends who are still facing a war back in Syria that is far reaching an end. Furthermore, their reunification with their families is considered highly difficult to be achieved. On the other hand, refugees perceive Europe as a promised land with high human rights standards and a land rich of opportunities. Unfortunately, the few asylum seekers who could make their way to the European Union are also facing many challenges. The reality that I could document in Berlin does not reflect the standers that the European Union claims to be based upon. Overcrowded shelters which do not function as a temporarily center, instead are hosting hundreds of people without being able to offer them basic rights, such as privacy and dignified life conditions; Christian missionaries who are trying to convert the most vulnerable segment of the population while promising them to receive, if converted, a legal status; and finally a long and uncertain bureaucratic system, are some of the difficulties that those refugees reported through their personal human stories.

TAKSIM SQUARE (ISTANBUL, TURKEY)

"Do you have five liras I am hungry?" We knew that we were in the European side of the biggest Turkish city. As soon as few liras went into the hand of a Syrian child, dozens more were coming. They all had their needs. Firya, a small heard-covered thirteen years old girl, was invoking the clemency and goodness of Allah to receive a few coins. She was talking and walking with us. It was when, after telling her that we ran out of our money, she decided to put together all her savings and offer them to us that we invited her for dinner. Hers is the story of many Syrian refugee children. Firya lost her father during the war. She escaped Aleppo and the refugee camps in East Turkey with her mother and older brother, and made her way to Istanbul. Besides Arabic and Kurdish, now she speaks some Turkish, which she learned on the streets asking for money and talking to people. I was surprised to notice that she could not count or read. She was very comfortable telling us her story. Her little eyes started shining while remembering how much she used to enjoy going to school. She used to know how to read and write, but after five years of intense war and missed classes, she forgot everything. "People here (In Turkey) are very nice. They come to my home and ask my mother to send her poor daughter to school. But my mother always asks them to leave. She, as my Syrian teacher, does not want me to study in another country. They both believe that this will change my traditions." Turkey is indeed offering education to asylum seekers and now AKP, the ruling party, despite the increasing opposition from other parties, such as the main liberal and historical Republican People Party, is trying to facilitate the life of hundreds of thousands of Syria by allowing them to work. "My mother will be back around 2 (AM!) Can you please talk to her and try to convince her to let me go to school?" Her mother is also trying to collect little money while selling tissues when her older brother found a poor-paid job as *simit* (Turkish bread) maker. The mother could not be convinced and Firya walked home with her ready for her only entertainment: an old television where she can watch Syrian programs during the few hours left of the night. Taksim, one of the symbol of the Turkish

city, which had been the scenario of many historical changes of the town, and in 2013 united the core of the Gezi Park protests, is now the number one destination for Syrian children and old women and men who are hoping to get some support from other Muslim brother and the few tourists, who are less numerous after the recent terrorist attack in Sultan Ahmed (Blue Mosque) area. Tired refugees are leaving the square with the first lights of the new day. Replacing them are workers and constructors of a mall and mosque in the huge square, which was the cause of huge popular protests only few years ago.

KADIKOY, ISTANBUL

We met Fade in Kadikoy, one of the centres of the Asiatic part of the city. He was wearing a suit and offered us a big smile. Fade reached Istanbul by plane only few months ago, but he is already working with a Syrian friend on a mobile phone application for Arabs who live in the city. This highly educated twenty-four years old boy would never leave Turkey for Europe. “I want to have opportunities, I want to work and create something. I do not want charity. I only want freedom. Turkish language is not easy, but the food here is delicious!”, he said biting his Balik Ekmek (sandwich with fish) and showing us his beautiful smile. Fade could have been considered a privileged person in Syria. Coming from a very wealthy family he had the opportunity to study in the best universities in Damascus, but during the last years his privileges became a burden. “Having money in Syria now means troubles!” Fade was indeed arrested without any reason, except the Syrian government’s need of the money. As soon as his family paid a huge sum to the authorities he was released, but the day after, his father was put in prison. He tells us that his family in Syria keeps paying and being arrested. Fade’s main dream is now to make enough money as to be able to bring his little sister to Turkey. In the same night messages were arriving to us. Saleh, a courageous seventeen years old boy was writing from the ancient city of Izmir. He was ready to start his journey to his dreamed Europe, the land of civilization, which was opening its arms to the needy refugees. His dream and the money that his family could collect enabled him to leave the biggest refugee camp in Jordan, the isolated Zaatari camp. He decided for his only and hardest option: being smuggled again into Syria in order to, by doing so, reach Turkey and from there start his travel. He was fully aware of this dangerous journey. More than four thousands Syrian refugees already lost their life while facing the sea. “I gave the smugglers extra money (400 euro) in order to let me take a video of the journey in the boat because I know that I will die in the sea, at least my video will be published and it will reach many people so the world will understand what we are facing and will help us!” It was useless to tell him not to take the boat. Images of high waves, people shouting, children screaming, woman praying reached us during our dinner. Fade pointed to the plastic tray on the table emphasizing that he wish that those boats were at least as resistant and of the same quality of what they used to serve us the dinner with, emphasizing the poor material the smugglers boats are made from. Saleh had to return to Turkey. The waves were too big and the smugglers called the boat back. The second day, as he was ready to leave and make his last movie, the border police caught them. Saleh was sent back to the place which he tried to escape. He is alive sitting in Zaatari refugee camp, looking at the metal barrier surrounding them. Without money left, without hope for a better future…

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SEA

How would have it been for him in Europe? Did Europeans really finally understand and feel compassionate about those people suffering? Are they welcoming? Being born with a good passport made it very easy for me to go all the way to Germany, the country whose Prime Minister Angela Merkel surprised the world by announcing its new policies towards asylum seekers and its willingness to accept them, and to see myself what it is true under the dream.

GERMANY, EUROPE

Crossing cities and villages in the North of the country, I was astonished by the elder age of the German population. The need for Germany to accept young asylum seekers was evident: new work force composed by skilful and motivated youth escaping war and misery. Part of the German public understands this need while also being concerned of the families that those young boys want, as soon as possible, to bring to Germany. Issues of social security system, the different values and faiths are all alarm bells for Germans who still did not completely accept the high immigration that started more than forty years ago from Turkey. While many Turkish residents and now European citizens still preserve and speak mostly their own language and live in self-built Turkish communities within Germany, asylum seekers are going through German classes.

Fatima a Palestinian nineteen years old girl from Syria proudly showed me her German language book. “My teacher is very nice she is patient and she told me that one day I will speak perfect German.” Fatima reached Berlin four month ago through the now well-known walking route that saw thousands of refugees crossing entire countries in order to reach the core of Europe. “I went to Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria and then Germany. I never left my city before that!” The young Palestinian went all her way with her husband, a shy nineteen years old boy from the same refugee camp in Syria. Fatima had to leave behind her two years of university. She almost never lost any classes even during the worst day of conflict in her city. “I was walking for two hours to reach the classes. The way was difficult: soldiers, explosions, shooting and dead animals and body were always on the way.” “Weren’t you scarred? I wondered. “Swai” (a little bit) she answered. Fatima lives with five hundreds asylum seekers in a shelter twenty minutes walk from the Berlin *Hauptbahnhof* (central station). Shelters look like big white balloons. The authorities have facilitated them as a provisional arriving centre for the newcomers before being sent to more permanent housing in different cities of Germany. Although the maximum stay is supposed to be of one week, many asylum seekers are currently l still in shelters for more than nine months. “The problem is the noise. The children are always crying and shouting. There is no privacy here.” Fatima complained.

PROSELYTIZATION IN BERLIN

At the entrance of the shelter, the security staff registers all volunteers and refugees who are leaving and entering the place. Two young Germans arrived to the shelter in order to entertain by playing music and offer their support by working in the reception of the centre. Unfortunately, especially during weekends, Christian missionaries are the ones who, following what they believe is God wills, go to asylum seekers' centres offering their truths. As Mohammed, a Sudanese peace activist and now volunteer in different shelters in Berlin, pointed out, missionaries are delighted while explaining to groups of unfamiliar refugees the advantages of leaving their own religion. "If you convert your asylum case will be easier. Christians get their documents in only few weeks. Almost all Syrians and Iranians are becoming Christians. If you choose the good religion, Germany will know that you are a good person and will help you." Refugees highly respect the authority of the locals. They are extremely helpful and polite to each and any volunteer in the shelter. If asked to seat and listen they will do it. If given the wrong information, as they do not dispose of any other source of knowledge, they will believe it. They constitute nowadays the perfect target for all religious people. They are in need and they are many. For this reason, especially during weekends, European religious fanatics come together for their mission. Sami comes from Syria, but now has piercings and a very much Berliner outlet. He complained to me about the pressures that he had to face. "During Christmas the situation was especially bad. Religious people felt the duty to come and talk to us. They wanted to convince us to accept their belives. They were telling me that my life in Germany it would have been easier if I converted. That I should not be afraid because all the refugees are embracing Christianity now." Sami is atheists and this gave him strength to counter the missionaries' propaganda. "If I do not believe, do not ask me to change the name of God!" On the other hand, Sami was aware of the pressure and suffering of religious people. He witnessed many of the approaches of religious people to asylum seekers in the shelters.

This manipulation of a highly vulnerable group is not the only challenge that refugees have to face in Europe. Asylum seekers are not allowed to cook their meals. Germans must do it for them. Portions of food without salt and flavour are served them every day. And every day the leftovers are almost equal as the amount of food prepared. As Marwan pointed out "here (in Germany) we are not allowed to do anything." Marwan is a Syrian boy who reached Germany three month ago after spending two years in Turkey. He speaks basic Turkish and explained me the challenges that he is facing in Berlin. While in Turkey he could find small jobs. In Germany, as he expressed: "we must study for everything even if we want to sell water, the authorities will ask you: "Did you study to do that?"

EUROPE, NO THANK YOU

Iraqis, but sometimes also Syrians, prefer to go back to their countries, to face the risks of being targeted by terrorist attack and to live in the middle of a brutal war rather than to remain in Germany. The images of those people packing their few belongings should be an alarm for Europe. The dreams of refugees had been broken by the not welcoming reality. Long journeys did not mean a new beginning, but a long waiting list. Or rather an interminable time, which asylum seekers do not know how to spend. Imposition of other

faiths, a highly bureaucratic system and the deprivation to carry on any simple tasks related to their life are all pressures on top of them. The far right is increasing the number of supporters and rallies spreading hate towards the newcomers. Politicians from the entire spectrum seem more concerned with their electorate than for improving the life conditions of those courageous people who escaped war and destruction. The creation of Europe had been a brave and dynamic move in order to build from the destruction of the World War. Europe stands due to its values and rights. Europe cannot afford to be passive. Europe could do much better, but unfortunately it seems that it is trying to do even worse.



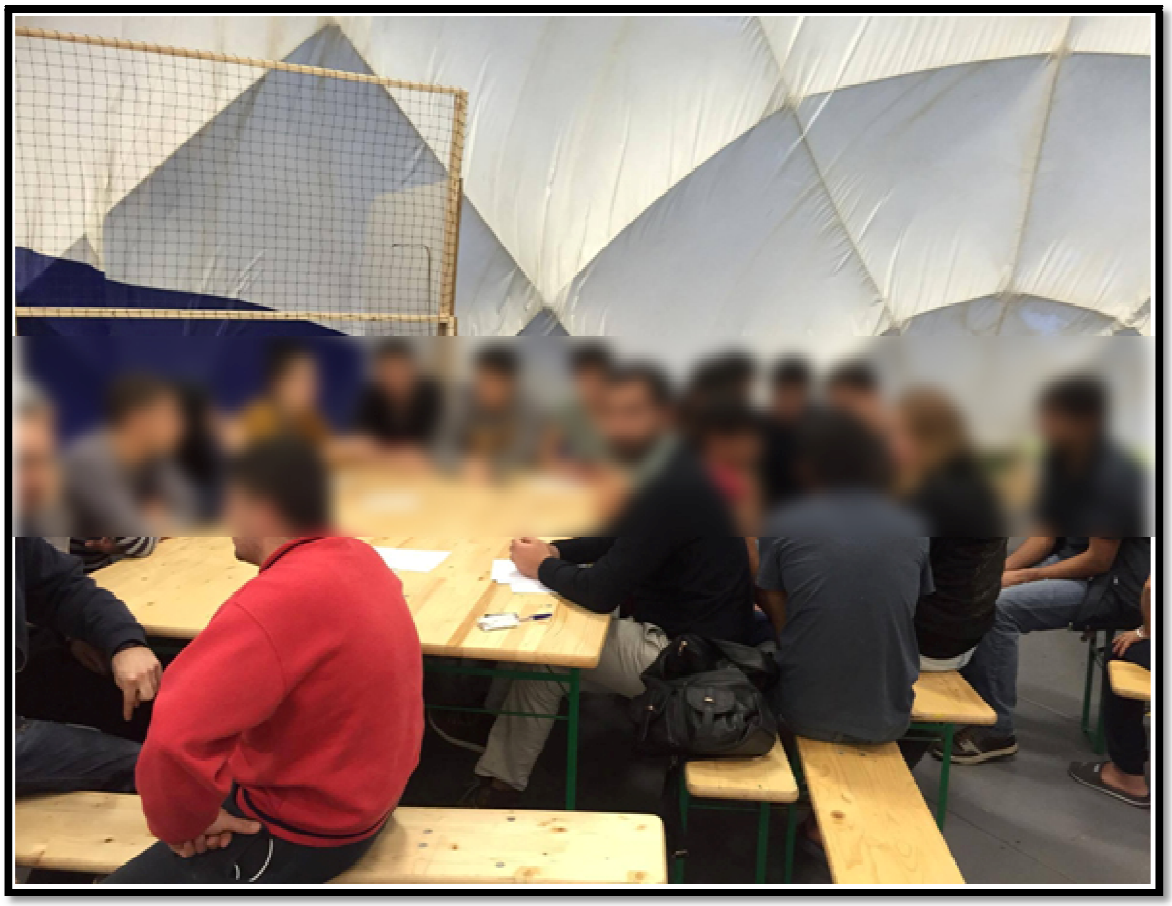
Picture 1: Photo courtesy of Veronica Bertozzi: Shelter outside, Berlin.



Picture 2: Photo courtesy of Veronica Bertozzi: Shelter outside, Berlin.



Picture 3: Photo courtesy of Veronica Bertozzi: Shelter inside, Berlin.



Picture 4: Photo courtesy of Veronica Bertozzi: Shelter inside, Berlin.