From Refugees to Immigrants: Syrian Diversity in Turkey

Mazen Hashem, Ph.D.

Sabahattin Zaim Üniversitesi

2017-04-04

There are no signs that the Syrian conflict would end soon, and even if it did Syria would be a devastated country and an inhospitable environment. It is crucial for Turks and Syrians in Turkey to deepen each other understanding. This paper reminds us that the Syrian identity is a complex one marked by diversity, and it is rooted in the culture of the Levant permeated with Islam as a civilizational reality. This identity is both cosmopolitan and conservative. Syria relishes in ethnic diversity of small groups, but it was the mainstream that formed this country's basis of cultural legitimacy. Nevertheless, the experiences of Syrians in Turkey differ markedly among their different sociocultural groups, and Turkish policies have no choice but to grabble with such complexity. Fortunately, unlocking the secrets of the Syrian cultural groupings is attainable as there is a significant common ground between Syrians and Turks at the level of values and norms. This paper presents a model that discusses cultural configurations and structural alignments that underlie the integration process of Syrians.

Introduction

The assumption once was that the conflict in Syria would end soon. Such innocent attitude conditioned many Turkish policies toward the new arriving Syrians. The refugees too were eager to belief that their ordeal is temporary. After six years, there is new realization. We can comfortably assume that most of those who once were considered guests are now actively planning for the long haul. According to a recent UNHCR poll, only 6% of Syrian refugees want to return to Syria in the near future, 8% say they will never return, while 3/4th are hesitant.[1] Interestingly, this is not only good for Syrians, it is also good for Turkey. Therefore, the challenge for researchers is to further understand the changing nature of the Syrian experience in Turkey, and to accordingly device appropriate policy recommendations. This paper proceeds through four sections: First, it sheds light on the complex history and identity of Syrians; second, it visits the polarization aspects among Syrians; third, it discusses the diversity of Syrian experiences in Turkey; fourth, it discusses the common ground between the peoples and cultures of Turks and Syrians.

I-History and Identity

Understanding the Syrian crisis today cannot be achieved without putting it in historical context. The well-known secret is that minorities in the post-Ottoman order sought to establish a social order

[1] "A Half-Million Syrian Returnees? A Look Behind the Numbers". Fabrice Balanche, July 7, 2017. Washington Institute for Near East Studies. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-half-million-syrian-returnees-a-look-behind-the-numbers.

that is odd with the culture of the country. Resisting such imposition formed the deep logic of the 2011 revolution. The crisis has a visible political exterior shell. However, what is under the surface in more important and have more long-term effects. In that regard, we need to consider three dimensions: that the creation of Syria as a nation-state was largely artificial; that it did not develop a modern sense of nationalism despite that claim to do so; that it represents a complex case of diversity, which involves the Kurds and the Nusayris. Also, we need to understand the unique type of religiosity.

1-Mis-formation

It is a grave misunderstanding to assume that saying "Syrian citizen" is equivalent to saying "Turkish citizen". Syria did not exist in history. Syria is a fictional creature, and as a nation-state, it was never materialized.

On the eve of the revolution Syria was only 55 years old. Out of such short period, Syria was for 40 years under dictatorial regimes that nullified the reality of a nation-state. The country was run as a private property with master-slave relationships. Indeed, Syria got its independence in 1946 to fall under the Baath party rule in 1963. The Leninist-socialist-secularist party pursued a crusade for uprooting the foundations of the society: its historical identity, its cultural proclivity, and its lifestyle. Obviously, such efforts typically fail, but they did plant deep contradictions within the society.

Since the Ottoman times, Syria was led by the notables of the society. They were elitist but they were educated. Few years after the independence young Syria became a model country under a pragmatist polity. The economy amazingly did well, and the University of Damascus soon became internationally recognized.

The Baath party came to power through a military coup. One of its main ideologues, Aflaq, believed in the necessity of a short-term proletariat dictatorship. The generals were quick to install ignorant revolutionaries in the critical nodes of the society, sacrificing Aflaq himself who later fled the country. That represented the Leninist dimension of the Baath Party that tried to uproot the foundations of the society.

The Baath party sucked-up the rationality of the young post-independent system, putting in place an arbitrary administration. Belonging to the party was the only criteria for holding an office, even if the person is scandalously unfit. The institutions of government progressively decayed. **The country became governed by an unholy trinity**: the Baath party, the military elite, and the intelligence agency.[1]

On the economic front, the people of Syria were historically distinguished by their entrepreneurial skills. Small-scale projects represented the backbone of the Syrian economy. Whether it was trade or industry, the economy thrived on a plethora of free-style economic initiatives. The Baath party was quick to dismantle such free-market structure through nationalization programs that included the industry as well as agriculture, in addition to putting tough restrictions on trade. And it should be noted, that such Baath policies in 1963 were the continuation of Naser's policies during the "period of merger" with Egypt in 1958. Also, this period introduced the Intelligence Agency for the first time in the country, commissioned to spy on citizens.[2]

---

[1] *Syria: A Recent History*. John McHugo. Saqi, 2014.

[2] See Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant. Emile Hokayem. Adelphi Series, 2103.

The social program of the Baath was secularism. The Syrian society was, and still is, largely conservative, and the party believed that it is necessary to cleanse the society of its backwardness. Denigration of the culture became programmatic to the extent that saying "Selam" in a governmental setting is considered a blasphemy; furthermore, it is considered an indicator of a suspicious belonging to an Islamist group. To be sure, the conservativeness of the Syrians is an open one, and it is not provincial. The Syrian society was historically open to many cultures and had its share of European precepts. **The conservativeness of the Syrian culture is at the level of values, naturally drawn from Islam, and is at once progressive**; it is progressive in the sense of expressing conservative values in contemporary forms and molds. The secular Baath party tried to uproot this very culture of the Syrian people despite its sophistication.[1]

The above discussion highlighted three dimensions: (1) the diminutive reality of Syria as a nation-state; (2) the establishment of a polity that is at odd with the realities of the citizens; (3) cultural deprivation and the colonization of the lifestyle. The discussion below explains the consequences of these three points.

2-Non-nationalistic Pride

One can hardly speak of Syria as a nation-state. This state has no achievements to boast with, no historical moments of victory, and no great leaders that capture the people's imagination. That is why Syrians seek anchors for their identity beyond the boundaries of their country. There are three facets through which Syrians can draw on as basis for identity: Syrian nationalism, Arab nationalism, or Islamic civilization. The first two lived a short while and then died out; the third one became the only option for Syrians to feel great.

Shortly after independence it was natural to seek Arab nationalism. France that colonized Syria sponsored intellectual production that denigrates the Ottoman legacy[2]. It portrayed the Ottomans as foreign invaders. The alternative for Syrians, the western elite claimed, is to become nationalist like Europe. The division of Greater Syria into Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine added to the sense of Arab nationalism. More importantly, the creation of the state of Israel was the biggest incentive to cling to a vague concept called Arab nationalism.

To be sure, among the public Arab nationalism had a benign meaning. **For ordinary people, nationalism merely meant a rejection of dividedness; it was not European style nationalism**. Furthermore, it represented only one layer of identity within a larger circle: belonging to the great civilization of Islam. In contrast, Arab nationalism for the secularists became a sacred identity. It is interesting to note that most of the Arab nationalist intellectuals were not Muslims. Indeed, Arab nationalism formed for them an *identity by substitution*.

Among some of the intelligentsia, Arab nationalism shrank to Syrian nationalism as they dug into the ancient history of Syria. Orientalist literature was popularized in an attempt to valorize the pre-Islamic history. Such literature spoke of the Phoenicians or the Assyrian Empire that fell in 612 BC… In reality, such emphasis stayed aloof in the minds and hearts of most Syrians. The Syrian identity is well anchored in Muslim history, including that of the Ottomans, even if they invoke ancient stories as passing points of pride. Most importantly, nobody can claim that such ancient history can provide

---

[1] See Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution. Thomas Pierret. Cambridge Middle East Studies, 2013.

[2] From the 'Terror of the World' to the 'Sick Man of Europe': European Images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth. Asli Çirakman. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.

a set of values or to motivate into action. Therefore, practically speaking, such claims of ancient greatness remained empty and superficial.

Secular nationalism, expectedly, became the preference of three small segments of the society: (1) intellectuals who studied in Europe and returned to Syria; (2) the dozen Christian sects that Syria has; and (3) Arab-speaking minority groups, such as the Nusayri, Druze, and Ismaeli.

It should be noted that as a secularist party, the Baath embraced Arab nationalism even it became, among Syrians themselves, a hated slogan, a joke, and a point of ridicule.

The point that should be emphasized here is that **Syria being void of a real history of a nation-state pushes people to embrace something greater.** The two available larger identities are Arabness and Islamicity. Arabness here does not mean Arab nationalism. Rather, Arabness (Urubah) has two elements: the rejection of dividedness, and the valuation of the Arabic language. Dividedness is considered the tool of colonial power, and Arabic as the tongue of the identity and the language of the Quran.[1]

As for Islamicity, most Syrians see it as a source of pride in Muslim history. The image of the great Umayyads as the first Islamic international order is something deep in the people's imagination. The term "Sham" or "Bilad al-Sham" exactly tries to denote such a fact. It is no wonder that the first demonstration at the beginnings of the revolution in March 15th 2011 took-off from the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. The Islamicity of the people also explains why speaking high of the Ottomans is common, and that was even before the revolution and before Turkey host fleeing Syrians. More important, **in the hearts and minds of people, Arabness and Islamicity are not competing identities, rather, they complement and reinforce each other**. Obviously, such description does not apply for most minority groups, and, therefore, the diversity of Syrians should now be discussed.

3-Diversity

The diversity of the Syrian people is often overstated, usually for political reasons. There is no reliable up-to-date census for Syrian groups except for Christians. The number of Christians in Syria dropped and there are reports that is progressively dwindling. The percentage of Kurds is claimed to be 10%; and it should be noted that there are two distinct populations of Kurds in Syria, those of the north east and those who are dispersed in the cities around Syria. Only the northern Kurds are stubbornly nationalist, while the others are well-integrated. Thus, **there was a solid majority of Sunni Arabs (73%) who formed the bulk of the population.** [2] **They were, and still are, the stock of the revolution**. Indeed, the minorities almost gave-up on Syria while the mainstream is clinging strongly to it.

The brutal response of the Syrian regime caused some demographic shifts that are still unfolding. While there is no reliable data on the new configuration, some studies concluded with the following picture: 60% Sunni-Arabs, Nusayri-Alawis 13%, Kurds 10%, Turkman 6%, Druze 4%, and Christians 3% (total does not add to hundred as smaller groups are ignored).[3]

---

[1] "The Levant Reconciling a Century of Contradictions." Mazen Hashem. *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 29, Spring 2012.

[2] See "What demographics Say about the Syrian conflict". FR. Youssef Courbage. World. Slate, 15.10.2012. http://www.slate.fr/story/62969/syrie-guerre-demographie-minorites

[3] Nusuh Study Center :التغيير الديمغرافي في سورية , 10-2016

There are other dimensions of diversity, the most important of which are region and socioeconomic status. As in many other countries, postcolonial developmental plans in Syria favored large cities, and the capitol in particular. Aleppo did not receive its due attention, as some of its inhabitants feel, until the time of the young dictator. Homs the important city in the middle was kept to itself. Latakia on the coast lately received significant attention since it is considered the home for the new Nusayris moving from mountain villages to the city.

Developmental unevenness is most stark in the east and northeast regions, the last of which was the most neglected. Such a situation created dangerous social cleavages. It is no surprise that the communist discourse found natural habitat in those areas. Also, **neglected areas became the main source of Baath Party recruitment efforts; the same could be said about enlistment in the military and the intelligence agency**. Lacking skills and alternatives, aspirants from those areas (and from Daraa in the south) once found in the above mentioned three outlets practical vehicles for social mobility.

It is worth noting a triple corollary about the neglected areas: (1) they were the least religiously committed, lacking important figures or Islamic movements; (2) they were the fertile ground for recruitment to *agencies of oppression*; and (3) they became the land were ISIS found a semi-home. Again, when we speak of Syrian people there is multiple populations, sometimes with little experiential common ground.

4-Distinctiveness and Cultural Pride

Many civilizations passed through the land now called Syria. All left landmarks on Syrian soil; however, it was Islamic civilization that formed the region's soul. As the capitol of the Umayyad, this center later drew immigrants from vast land that was under their control. Syrian history was also entangled with that of Egypt from the time the Memluks. Being the gateway of the Ottoman Empire toward Arab-speaking countries, the Turkish-Syrian relationships were dense as evident in the number of Syrian families with Turkic surnames (Kuwwatli, Shishakli, Shakalli, Dalati, Mardini, Khoja, Bayazid, etc.). What is more interesting and indicative is that those families are considered original families of the *sham*.

This hospitable area at the heart of the Levant also received waves of outsiders who belonged to different cultures, including Arnavuts, Circassians, and new Kurds. Those groups added to an already diverse population. This is the historical processes that imprinted the Syrian people with diversity in looks as well in food, in customs as well as in accents. It also endowed Syrians with adaptability and instilled in them a high level of entrepreneurial skills.

Now let us put all the elements together: adaptability + skills + diversity + distinctive language + Islamic civilization ➔ Sense of distinctiveness and cultural pride.

So, what holds Syrians together? It is exactly the sense of distinctiveness, the pride in the great Muslim civilization, as well as the reality of a colorful culture, peaceful coexistence and the ability for adaptation.[1]

Ironically, the sense of distinctiveness permeates all the segments of the society. The dwellers of major cities are proud of their cosmopolitan culture in which you find clear European elements that were naturalized. The dwellers of towns are proud of their cultural pureness that nevertheless

[1] "Syrian Exceptionalism and Revolution". Mazen Hashem. *Islamic Monthly*, May 2011.

emulated the culture of big cities. The minorities are proud of being able to preserve their uniqueness. And so on, every segment of the society thinks that it is special.

One can speak of Syrianness more than speaking of a typical Syrian. What draws people together is shared lifestyles that inhabit different neighborhoods and towns. **Syrian nationalism does not exist as such, despite clinging to Syrian ways**. Such ways are mini bonds that co-live with each other. The aristocratic ideal is deeply ingrained in Syrian consciousness, which includes distinctiveness, conservative values, moderated openness, and elaborate fussy customs. Since the rise of the Baath party, such lifestyle was challenged by the rise of ruralists, and more so by the later rise of the sectarian nouveau riche who captured the political office. Yet, the original Syrian life style is still a magnet and a standard, despite all the jolts it experienced, including that of commercial modernism.

Syrian reality is often described as a mosaic and a piece of art that has only a frail frame. Pretty and weak she is, also determined and overconfident. Flexible and pragmatic, but still insists on its uniqueness and does not stop from reproducing its colorful multisided self.

The brutal war that was waged against those human beings did not strip Syrians from their qualities, but certainly it strained people's behavior. Keeping in mind such national character *and* the extra-ordinary circumstances of their entry to Turkey allows us to devise better policies regarding Syrians in Turkey. To complete the picture, we should investigate the cotemporary dividing lines in the Syrian society.

II-Contemporary Fissures

By now it should not come as a surprise that when a Syrian boasts with his Syrianness, he or she does not really mean Syria. He would have meant Aleppo, Damascus, Latakia, or any other place he came from. This often criticized "regionalism" is a structural feature in the Syrian culture. Once we understand its origins, it is no longer a puzzle.

Speaking of Syrian regionalism, **the Syrian society is dissected horizontally and diagonally**. Horizontally, the Syrian larger society is divided into the westward area and the eastward area. The westward habitat includes stretches from Damascus in the south up to Aleppo in the north passing Homs in the middle and swerving through coastal cities. On the other hand, the eastern habitat stretches from Daraa in the south passing through Deir al-Zor and al-Raqqa as well all the area northeast of the Euphrates. Without falling into reductionism, there are clear signs that the culture of the river's eastern bank maintained a measure of clan relationships, which include duties and privileges. In contemporary times, such a structure moved to the background and is invoked only in time of crises. It is worth noting that the culture and social structure of Syria's eastern region has much compatibility with western Iraq, and marriage patterns attest to that. In contrast, the culture and microstructure of Syrian western habitat is more urbanist and had been long exposed to outside influences which were slowly reconciled with local cultures. But do not go very far and remember that culturally speaking Syria is a mosaic and no pattern holds without significant exceptions.

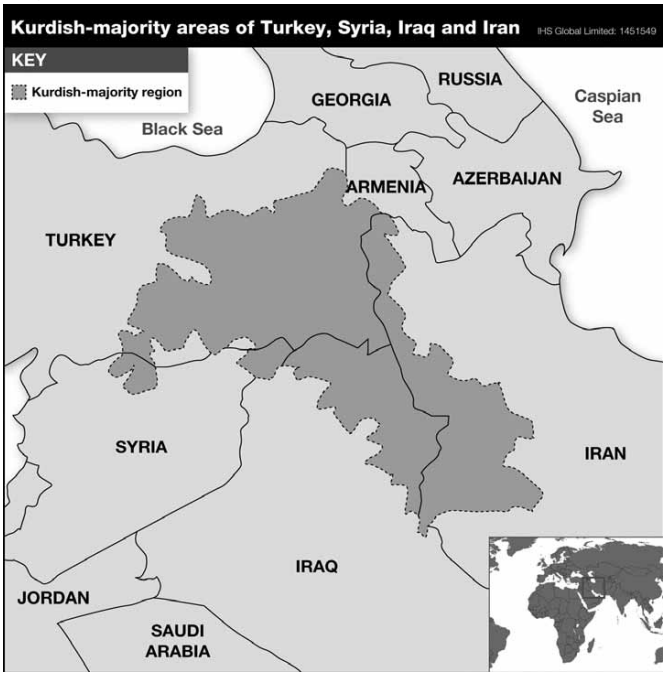
Syria is also diagonally differentiated. Each city and town is stratified along family name and the goodness of behavior. Indeed, it is not simply an assured heredity position. Rather, there are specific expectations connected with the position of nobility—i.e., the name comes with a price. True, modernity has eroded much of this pattern, but it is still there, and people still long to it. Even it remained politically salient. As the filth of society captured political power, people became more connected to the old pattern of the families of honor who are obliged by self-imposed limits. The revolution attested to that.

It should be noted here that **religion belongingness is not a divider in Syria despite its depth**. The subjects of religiosity, and sectarianism will be discussed later but after discussing the special issue of Kurds.

1-The Kurds

There are two groups of Kurds in Syria that are distinctly different. There is the nationalist Kurds of the north and the integrated Kurds of the interior. The number of Kurds in Syria is said to range from 7 to 15%. But given the stark differences between the two aforementioned segments, this number does not explain much. **Being a Kurd in the interior is a matter of heritage. Being a Kurd from the north has a strong nationalistic depth**.

Map of Kurdish concentration areas[1]:



The Kurds of the interior are found in different cities and towns across Syria, including Aleppo, Damascus, and Latakia. Neither they are mountain people nor are they secluded from the society. You might find a specific neighborhood with Kurdish density, but this is related to social class as much as to ethnicity. It is true that the communist party once had its eyes on the Kurds and succeeded in some recruitment, but that was true not only for the Kurds as it included other segments of the working class. Anyhow, such a thing has become idle history.[2]

Kurds of the interior are well integrated, speak perfect Arabic, and the younger generations did not maintain their heritage language. There are no tensions in the relationships between Kurds and non-Kurds, as Kurdishness is not an important social identifier in the minds of most Syrians. After independence, Syria had a Kurdish president, Husni al-Zaim, who assumed power through a coup, and his removal in another coup was a matter of politics not ethnicity. The famous Kurdish historian

---

[1] "Arab Spring Heats Up Kurdish Issue". Soner Cagaptay. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 12, 2012. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-spring-heats-up-kurdish-issue.

[2] "Rural Development and Migration in Northeast Syria". Meyer Günter. in *Anthropology and Development in North Africa and the Middle East*, Eds. Muneera Salem-Murdock and Michael M. Horowitz. Westview Press, 1990.

and Syrian Education Minister, Muhammad KurdAli was a defender of an Arabic Syria permeated with Islam, although he was not an Islamist[1].

A. The Northern Kurds

The Kurds of the north represent a distinct story. In the west, Efrin just north of Aleppo is an ancient home for Kurds. Towards the northeast, Kurds are scattered and has a large concentration in the city of Qamishli. The northeastern area was long a swath of land where Kurdish, Turkman, and Arab tribes wondered. Even the literature of the Kurdish nationalists acknowledges this fact.[2] This area received significant migration waves from Turkey in early 1900s fleeing instability. Another wave crossed from Iraq in the mid of last century.[3]

All nationalisms are constructed myths, and Rojova (a Kurdish homeland in northern Syria) is a new one with a very thin claim. We do not have accurate statistics about Kurdish distribution in the north, but it often acknowledged that Kurds in the north are (1) scattered across wide stretch of land; and (2) do not form a majority of the population of the north.

So, where do Kurdish grievances come from? Before we try to answer, we should keep in mind the complete difference between the two segments of Kurds, as the interior Kurds are for the most part only nominally as such. Yes, some interior Kurds may sympathize with the claims of the northern Kurds on the basis of human rights, but they are definitely not willing to be part of their political project. More importantly, there is no group in Syria that does not feel that it is oppressed and marginalized. This pan-grievances syndrome includes the Nusayris themselves whom political power is under their name and whom actively die in its defense.

One source of grievance is the chauvinistic policies of the Baath rule. For example, renaming the towns to have an Arabic name, such as Kobani versus Ain al-Arab, Qamishlu or Qamishli. Ironically, the Kurdish name might not be more authentic than the Arabic imposed one. More importantly, the refusal of the Syrian government to officially recognize the Kurdish language and teach it in school is a significant sore point. Otherwise, most of the rest of grievances are based on interest-based friction. And **one cannot claim that there is a real enmity between Kurds and Arabs in the north, as they co-lived peacefully**.

However, two issues stand out, the special census and the “Arab belt”, both are buried under heavy ideological layers. A special census to account for the Kurds in the northeast was ordered after independent but not funded until the 1960s. The impetus of this special census was the apparent massive increase in the number of Kurds in the northeast. Consequently, some of them were de-nationalized. From a Kurdish perspective, it was a clear act of aggression. For the Syrian government then (before the Baath came to power), it was part of normal state-building efforts. That is because citizenship certificates were granted to Kurds based on just a piece of paper form a local chief (*mukhtar*), and some Kurds crossed the borders to Syria coming from Iraq. Bribery was also use to obtain Syrian citizenship. While keeping a segment of the population without legal status, with all its negative implications, can never be wise, the historical context is understandable. Assad the son bestowed citizenship to those Kurds after the revolution so they do not join it; but it was a too late expedient action.

---

[1] التكون التاريخي الحديث للجزيرة السورية. جمال باروت، ص 305.

[2] **وثائق عن الحركة القومية الكوردية التحررية: ملاحظات تاريخية ودراسات أولية**. عبد الفتاح علي يحيى البوتاني. كوردستان: إربيل، مؤسسة موكرياني للطباعة والنشر، 2001

[3] Ibid.

The second major point of grievance is what the Kurds call the racist "Arab belt". After constructing the Euphrates Dam, people who lived in the villages near the dam had to be relocated. The government established for them new villages in the north east in an area where there are mixed Arab and Kurd villages. Thus, it was not a belt, although it slightly altered the Kurd/Arab population ratio in the northeast.

Again, one can hardly defend the Baath party's policies and behavior. But apart from that, we cannot understand the issue of Arab-northern Kurd relationships if we do not put it in context. There is no clear-cut verdict on the issues of the north. The boundaries themselves were new and subject to the balance of power after ending the Ottoman rule. Indeed, the Kurdish issue in northern Syria is a byproduct of the Turkish issue. The newly-born state of Syria was a product of international design and mandate. Early politicians were just trying to consolidate the boundaries of this fragile entity, and it was normal to have an Arab overtone, for the government then needed every shred of legitimacy.

At the eve of the Ottoman collapse, intellectuals and notables of the time produced three discourses: the Islamic bond, Syrian patriotism, and Arab nationalism. The discourse of Arab nationalism was the most expedient and the most appealing, exactly because it was a time of nationalism worldwide. There were European nationalisms that were considered the model for development, and next door there was the Turkish nationalism. Add to this the settler-based occupation of Palestine. Therefore, it was no surprise that the nationalist discourse prevailed then. But it should be noted that **Arab nationalism itself shifted from one that sees itself within the Muslim ummah to a secularist one**. The discourse of Arslan, Darwaza, and Kawakbi was from the first kind, while Arsuzi and Zuraik was from the second kind. Interestingly, the last two intellectuals had a Nusayri and a Christian background, respectively.

B. The Charge of Racism

The nationalist Kurdish discourse is not less racist than the nationalist Arab discourse. **Being leftist, the Kurdish nationalist discourse does not stop at denigrating Arabness but it extends to insult Islam itself**. At the beginning of the revolution many non-Kurdish Syrians sympathized with the Kurdish demands. For the average Syrian, diversity is normal and Kurds should gain cultural rights. However, many Syrians gradually discovered the sectarianism of the Kurdish political discourse. One may ask why a pan-Arab project is bad while it is a virtue when it comes to Kurds. Later, the revelation that Hezbollah trained Kurdish fighters and that the secessionist Kurdish movements in Syria and Iraq had once received support and training from Israel put the issue of Kurdishness in a different light. For many Syrians, the behavior of the PYD/YPG resurrects old suspicions. Fortunately, most Kurdish political parties do not approve the behavior of the PYD and are often its victims. Yet, the Kurdish nationalist sentiments are consistently appealing and push some Kurds to a logic of justification.

2-Religiosity

The Syrian society is visibly conservative but also is unmistakably modern. Religious practice in Syria mixes three elements. First, heritage rootedness as the country historically hosted many learned people in religion. The discourse of the ulama, Jumaa khutbas, and dawa masjids permeates the culture. Even after the uprooting of many Islamic activities in the 1980s, activism continued in subtler ways. The second element is a sufi motif, although it is not an order-Sufism that Turkey is familiar with. Sufism in the Syrian context is that soft handling of matters related to religion. The third element is rationalistic religiosity. It is the attitude that is eager to verify the authenticity of what is claimed to be Islam. In total, **religious commitment *and* moderation is a visible feature of**

the Syrian society, a starkly different picture of what characterizes militants today. And no wonder, most of extreme militants fighting today in Syria are not Syrians in the first place.

There were other factors that kept Syria a place of *cosmopolitan conservativism*. It was the failed secularization efforts. Contrasting the Syrian society to that of Turkey or Egypt clearly demonstrates this point. The secularization programs hit the Syrian people through something they loath: a communist discourse and corrupted socialist programs. Putting everything aside, how can an entrepreneurial culture accept such type of a secular mode. The second factor was political, where civil society connected to western backers did not exist in Syria. That is why one generally finds the real secular tendencies mainly among non-Muslim minorities in addition to some true believers from all walks of life.

One of the astonishing features of Syrian religiosity is that it relishes in cities much more than the countryside. Also, Syrian religiosity is well entrenched in the upper classes of the society. For sure, the countryside is more conventional, but definitely not more committed to Islam.

3-The sectarian dimension

This is a thorny issue as sectarianism imposed itself on the Syrian theater despite that the Syrian social milieu is unhospitable to sectarianism. Structurally, the Syrian society is diverse, and culturally it is pragmatic and open—sectarianism does not strive in such an environment. Yet, **decades of dictatorial malign *and* cultural denigration produced categorical rejection of a regime that is largely under the control of a marginal group**, the Nusayri-Alawis.

The Nusayri group is one of several offshoots that appeared in Muslim history, even though it is the most undeveloped.[1] The story goes back to the second Hijri century when different groups invented different accounts for the continuation of the Imams from Ali's offspring. Mainstream shia stopped the chain at the twelfth imam who disappeared and went into occultation, as they believe. The Ismaili stopped earlier at the seventh imam, ascribing to him divine qualities. From the Seveners many offshoot groups proliferated, summed together in Islamic literature under the term *ghulat*, meaning that they went too far and violated basic tenants of Islam to the degree that they cannot be considered Muslims.

Fluidity and fragmentation represented the history of Nusayris. So we cannot speak of a group with orderly or gradual development. The Nusayri doctrine developed on the margins of societies in Iraq and Syria, dressing pagan Persian ideas with notions of illumination. Specifically, they developed a gnostic-like trinity of a divine Ali, represented in the *meaning*, the *name/barrier*, and the *door*. Note that the Nusayris do not have a reference holy book or much literature. That is why **the belief content of the sect is unhelpful in understanding todays Nusayris**, except that their creed does not command respect from Muslims. The social history of the Nusayris allows for a more realistic understanding of this group.

The Nusayri groups were fragmented and often fought with each other. They were typically subject to feudal expropriation of other influential Nusayri groups. Starting the 13th century, the Nusayri ideas spread to the mountains near Latakia on Syria's coast. **It was not oppression that pushed them to the mountains as it is usually claimed**. Rather, the Nusayri call found vacuum in remote

[1] Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace. Leon T. Goldsmith. Hurst & Company, 2015.

insulated areas where ignorance prevailed and exploitative preachers had a chance to succeed. It is a similar story to the Bektashi and Alawis in Anatolia.[1]

The Memluks exerted a military effort to organize splinter groups, in order to be able to collect taxes and strengthen the defenses against Crusade incursions. The decentralized Ottoman system levied taxes on the Nusayri villagers (the dirham on men), but not those in the cities. While feudal relationships prevailed in the southern Nusayri villages, the northern Nusayri villages organized itself as warlords living off raiding other villages and ambushing trade on Latakia-Aleppo route. This pattern was intensified after the rise of Latakia as a commercial port. It was only natural that the people of Latakia sought Ottoman protection from the Nusayri gangs, whose sect became increasingly hateful. Ironically, the Nusayris benefited significantly from the Ottoman Hamidian era. Schools were opened in their areas and a middle-class formed amongst them.[2]

Nusayris fit well the model of marginal groups clinging to their clans, pursue a mercenary lifestyle, ally themselves with whoever seems to benefit from, and betray the relationship between one another. For example, the Nusayris in Syria first sided with Ibrahim Pasha dispatched from Egypt, then switched to the Ottomans. When Syria was under France, a known Nusayri leader submitted a letter pleading the French for protection from Muslims, promising loyalty to France in return. France tried to dissect Syria and created an Alawi Statelet among four other formations that included the State of Aleppo and the State of Damascus. This division failed, mainly because the Nusayris then did not have enough basis for maintaining a state.

The French Mandate in Syria formed the Army of the Orient, and recruited in it many minority members, including the Nusayris. When Syria got its independence in 1946 as ratified by the United Nation, the new independent country inherited that army. **The army was the path for minorities toward power**. To be sure, the army leadership came largely from the larger society, while minorities were overrepresented in lower ranks.

Hafez Assad joined a then secretive group in the army called itself the *military committee*. All of its members were from non-Muslim minorities: four Nusayri, two Ismaeli, and one Druze. They represented groups that deeply loath the larger society. They adopted a communist revengeful ideology. Under the banner of Arab Nationalism and the more committed to socialist programs, the committee captured dual power: power in the military and power in the Baath party. Generally, the Baath party was dominated from the disgruntled social classes, largely from neglected rural areas. Being the more radical and the more cohesive, it was the Nusayri minority group who dominated the Baath Party through military positions. Assad the father soon eliminated his partners from other minorities and monopolized power for his sect. He had also to eliminate the more principled Nusayri members in his group. Then he made a bargain with international powers, including handing the strategic Golan Heights to Israel. In this way, the Nusayris became a pillar in the regional order.[3]

Thus, sectarianism in Syria developed along political, not religious lines. In the eyes of the general Syrian people, **the Nusayri group is cursed with three properties: a syncretic sect, national traitors, and oppressive dictatorship**. This point very much illuminates the special character of the revolution and its perseverance. The relative islamicity of the revolution is partly due to the rejection of Islam by the Nusayris. Again, the regime of Syria is not Nusayri as much as it is sectarian. That is, it

---

[1] A History of the 'Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic. Stefan Winter NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

[2] ibid.

[3] *The Struggle for Syria*. Patrick Seale, 1988.

depends on the loyalty of a sect, but does not have much religious content to it. To be sure, the Nusayri at large are victims of the Nusayri regime. The Assad family brought the Nusayri into power, made scores of them wealthy, but for the most part the Nusayri community is poor and does not have many avenues for upward mobility. **Ironically, the Nusayri community members are at once the victims and the tool of oppression**. They do most of the abhorrent acts at the price of sealing their future and deepening hatred against them. And after the deep insertion of Iran into Syria, we might be witnessing a change in the religio-sectarian identification of Nusayris.

Interestingly, after Syria became a regional and international arena, Syrian minorities, including the Nusayris, now started to emphasize that they are the pure Syrians in contrast to cross-borders claims. Unfortunately, this is no more than an apologetic attitude as it effectively denies the historical depth of the Levant and laments the alignment of most minorities with the brutal Syrian regime.

Lastly, let us point to one mis-categorization of the Syrian conflict. What is going in Syria is not a civil war, although sectarian dynamics were employed by the regime, which created a hospitable environment for Sunni radicals. But overall, the conflict of Syria is still about a fascist regime killing its own people and selling the country to the devil.

This section was a necessary historical excursion to highlight two aspects: the nature of the Syrian society, and how much its history is interwind with that of Turkey. No policy would be effective without such recognition.

III-The Many Syrians in Turkey

The discussion so far has focused on two interrelated themes: that Syria was never a nation-state in a meaningful way, and the cultural diversity of Syrians. Those two factors are very relevant to the existence of Syrians in Turkey. Lacking a strong sense of nationalism translates into willingness to adapt to the new Turkish national context, and social diversity translates into multiple avenues of integration within the Turkish society. Below is an elaboration on those two attributes.

1. Celebratory Syrianness

The casual observer might feel that Syrians in Turkey are clinging too much to Syria. But this is true on the surface only. We need here to be very cognizant to the experiential reality of Syrians who moved from their mother home to a new country. Such experience is traumatizing in one or more ways: (1) losing family members; (2) losing property and financial instruments; and (3) suddenness. So even the lucky one faced migration in a sudden way, which is by itself destabilizing. As for the second element, it is hard to find a Syrian who has not been hit financially. Even those who did not physically lose property, new financial burdens have been assigned to them as they need to support other Syrians. Indeed, the savings of Syrians were being depleted at a fast pace.

Obviously, the forced nature of the move from Syria to Turkey constitutes the biggest challenge. It is true that man Syrians willingly moved to Turkey, but they made this “free” decision under duress and lacking alternatives. The suddenness of the move and being extracted from the natural habitat is disorienting. While most Syrians are very thankful for the Turkish opportunity, and they compare themselves to other Syrians who fled to other countries recognizing their relative advantage compared to Jordan or Lebanon, for example. Yet, that does not cancel the brutal reality that led them to leave. The least to say, the personal plans of people were disrupted, whether it was work or education, on the top of being uprooted from the neighborhood and the larger family setting.

The point here is that regardless of the hospitality of Turkey toward Syrian newcomers, the experience of coming to Turkey is relatively traumatic, which makes people want to cling to whatever left of the past. Even some stubbornness and the refusal of what seems in their best interest could be explained by this longing to preserve something from their past life that they never thought it would be ravished the way it did.

As noted, **when Syrians boast in their Syrianness, they largely mean reminiscing about the own town, and it is not a sign of nationalism**. That is why I called it *celebratory Syrianness*. With the passing of time, the resistance against adaptation wears off gradually, although reminiscence continues in non-harmful ways.

2. Social Class

Class is an important social organizer in modern society. Muslim societies customarily have another social organizer based on family name. The realities of Muslim societies today combine the two elements in a variety of ways. The reproduction of this social mode is evident in the case of Syrians in Turkey, and İstanbul serves as a good example. As it is well-known, Fatih area hosts a large number of Syrians, although residential rental there is not that low. So how do we explain that? It is exactly the religious flavor of Fatih that drew a specific segment of Syrians toward this mahalle. Ethnic density allows for establishing their own small businesses, which creates another factor in drawing Syrian toward the area. In turn, density of Syrians in such an area makes relief organizations establish their offices in the vicinity. But Fatih Mahalle did not draw all types of Syrians, rather, only those whose class-culture corresponds to that of Fatih. Indeed, others actively chose not to reside there, seeking more modernized social settings.

The interesting thing is that such natural process of **concentration invites certain reactions among the host society, usually negative**. The large numbers of newcomers necessarily color the area with their lifestyle. That in turn heightens the sense of encroachment among members of the host society. Furthermore, the concentration of a large number of ethnic members in a new society lead them toward a lower level of *behavior censoring*. That is, when the number of a newly arriving ethnic group is small, members tend to watch their behavior in an effort to become less visible and feel less foreign. However, when the number is large, the ethnic group unconsciously defaults to its old pattern of behavior and reserves to itself a place in the public sphere, which usually irritates the host society.

Areas of Syrian concentrations become considered as the true representation of Syrians in the minds of ordinary people and policy makers as well. This leads to ineffective policies.

In general, Syrians in larger İstanbul are for the most part invisible, scattered along different neighborhoods in concert with their work, adding diversity to this metropolis. Indeed, while Fatih's model captures the attention, Syrians who live in other areas are larger by many folds. Esenyurt represents a counter example of Syrians in conservative Fatih, where only the reality of rent affordability force some to live there, waiting the opportunity to move to decent Beylikdüzü. Some Syrians chose to live in the Asian side of İstanbul, dedicated by work and network of friends. The story of students is very different as it is very much attached to their respective universities.

3. Locale and Transplanting

If neighborhood-mirroring is an interesting phenomenon, locale transplanting represents a similar logic but on a larger scale. As it is well-known, and it is a fact worth reemphasizing, many Syrians were hastily uprooted from their hometowns. Coming to Turkey was not a well-thought carefully planned matter. So it is only natural to seek adjacent Turkish cities. That is why Gaziantep hosts

many people from Aleppo specifically, Urfa hosts from Deir al-Zor, and Mersin hosts many Syrians from Latakia. İstanbul, on the other hand, hosts members of different Syrian cities with a significant contingent from Damascus. More important is that the Syrian İstanbulees tend to approximate the typical migrant. That is, many of them came to Turkey after a period of deliberation evaluating their options. While it is true that not many options are available, those who came to Turkey through airports tend to have a different story form those who fled horrors and crossed the borders. And in all cases, **the principle of *chain-migration* operates where newcomers seek areas in which they know someone**.

Obviously, the size of the host city plays a significant role in the type of immigrant accommodation. A large metropolitan city like İstanbul allows for less visibility of newcomers. Furthermore, since the socializing engine of a big city is powerful, it molds newcomers quicker.

On the other side of the continuum the small city of Reyhanlı stands as a different prototype. This Hatay Province city is next to the Syrian borders and drew Syrian populations largely from Idlib and its rural areas. Newcomers with limited means found the cost of living in this city something inviting. It is a highly rational choice to pick such a city. That is, as people have little objective chance to employ their meager resources and modest level of skills and education, it is practical to settle within this little city.

However, having a large number of newcomers in a small city creates its own dynamics. First of all, those migrants do approximate refugees in the sense that they have little means to survive by themselves and little chance for improving their situation. Therefore, survival attitudes prevail. And such attitude invites petty-selfish behavior among some people. Short-term mentality prevails, and many people find themselves stuck in a vicious circle.

In such an environment, there are not many incentives to integrate into the mainstream Turkish society. Also, there are less opportunities to pursue that. **Those areas are structurally destined to become the incubators of marginality**. The following characteristics mark such places: (1) lower level of skills and education; (2) fewer opportunities; (3) meager returns on economic activities; and (4) concentration of provincial outlook and culture. Such combination tends to produce two unwelcomed outcomes: *permeant dependability* and *revengeful marginality*.

Dependability puts pressures on Turkish public services. Whether it is schools, hospitals, or parks, they experience a surge of demand that could not be accommodated. Small cities need exerted effort and support from Ankara. This support is three-fold: financial, administrative, and capacity. Indeed, small cities with large Syrian population do not have economic strength to accommodate the new situation by themselves. Another big challenge is having appropriate ordinances that enable the local government to deal with the challenge. This is a tricky point. While the big muscle of Ankara is needed, the ordinances need to fit the special situation of the small city. The third challenge might be the hardest, which is securing skills and knowledge to deal with the needs of the newcomers. **Ironically, international relief organizations tend to institutionalize dependency**. This is related to the nature of the service and the manner of delivering it.

Revengeful marginality is a dangerous pathway, and young people are more likely to fall in it. Conscious of being trapped by circumstances and the little objective chance of mobility invite delinquent behavior. Delinquent behavior is stimulated by three major factors: (1) the absence of social controls and the breakup of families and old neighborhood ties; (2) the lack of opportunities for self-development; and (3) the sense of anonymity and cultural estrangement. Time is sensitive here. That is, new social controls and social ties could develop, and skill support could eventually

come. The critical factor is that such support come in time to prevent maladjustment. Obviously, delinquent behavior could turn into criminal behavior. To be sure, such behavior is initially directed to their own people (Syrians), but it eventually spills over to the wider Turkish parameters, only to invite justified fear and reactions that worsen the original situation.

4. Age and Capacity

Any policy regarding Syrians in Turkey should take age into consideration. We need to remind ourselves that older people have less capacity to adapt, and need less to do that. Learning the Turkish language works as a good illustrator: young people are customarily being able to reach an acceptable level within a year, while older folks struggle to the point of giving up.

The irony here is that the *unassimilable Syrian* stands out in the Turkish mind as the annoying representative of the Syrian community, while the younger members go unnoticed.

The age cohorts call for very different policies and accommodation contexts. While young people need places in schools and universities, older people are either entrepreneurs or took a compulsory early retirement. Regulations of opening business are more relevant to this second cohort, although they are likely to be the parents of the first cohort.

Nevertheless, it should not go unmentioned that those young people boost the Turkish society in terms demographic age distribution. Since the 1990s, the Turkish fertility rate has significantly declined while the economy was expanding and demanding more labor[1]. **In the demographic sense, Syrian young members are a treasure for Turkey**. Economically speaking, Turkey's expanding economy produces the middle-class trap phenomenon. The Turkish economy is partially driven by cheap labor and new capital, and the new entrants to the middle-class are eager to attain a life style that they cannot afford and could distort economic activities and leave gaps in the labor market. Economically speaking, **Syrian newcomers are already helping Turkey in avoiding the middle-class trap**, and this is a forgotten fact.

5. The Modernity They Found

The policies of Syria since the Baath Party captured power in 1963 tried to insulate Syria from the outside world. The rhetoric against imperialism had to be reflected somehow in practice. There were two effects to such a position: suffocating barriers against contemporary standards, and a tempered insertion of modernity into the society. But later on, modern media and the virtual means of communication trespassed all barriers. Such contradictions created an obsessive interest in modern ways, especially for those whose social position and familial means did not allow for a wider exposure to modernity through private means. Now the modernity-deprived Syrians suddenly found in Turkey the modernity they are curious about, especially in large cities.

Such encounter with *intense modernity* creates contradictory outcomes. Some find in it an opportunity for learning ways they longed to practice. Other experience Simmel's "blasé attitude" or Durkheimian "alienation". The first is the attitude of those who feel exhausted and seek to live distracted from the agony they passed through and aborted the dreams that they once pursued. This a mild condition of disassociation with reality, and some of them can be recovered if worthwhile projects and venues become clear to them.

The second kind of maladaptation, alienation, is worrisome. Some young people found themselves away from normative social controls. Those who lived in Syria within a strict or cloistered

[1] Turkey Population http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/turkey-population/

environment are prone to suffer the most. Three factors are relevant here: (1) the size of the place they came from; (2) its degree of development; and (3) previous exposure to modern ways. Some of those social controls were very strict; others were hypocritical and laid only a fig leaf over problematic behavior, especially in issues related to gender relations. All of such **social controls were shattered in the new anonymous environment**, especially in big cities. The misbehavior of some Syrian youth is related to such dynamics. In general, metropolises offer personal anonymity, and the diversity of people and life styles gives outsiders a sense that there are no standards whatsoever.

To be sure, Syrian major cities were not that underdeveloped as some Turks might think. However, some villages and small town were. And recall what has been noted about religiosity in Syria. The modern cities are, in general, more observant than the outline areas, although the outlines are more conventional. Strict social controls of provincial culture produce its opposites far from home, and by definition they do not have the capacity to operate outside their small locale. Those Syrians from such backgrounds suddenly encountered modernity in Turkey. Some may cathartically love it, others may hate it but indulge in it; the net effect is getting out of balance. This is an addition to the balance-disturbing effect of the conflict: (1) exposure to extreme levels of fear; (2) loss of loved ones; (3) sharp decline in financial means; (4) interruption of life projects such as education; (5) disruption of social networks, including family, kin, and friends; (6) sudden extraction from home; and (7) landing in a foreign place with all its unknowns and complexities.

6. The Public Commons

One of the riddles in political order is the maintenance of the *commons*. Commons are the shared facilities in a society in which their benefits are shared regardless of the contribution of single individuals. Why should people carry the cost of maintaining the commons despite that it does not affect the receipt of the benefits/outcomes. This predicament extends to include the narcistic use of the commons. A flower in the street delivers beauty for every pedestrian, but picking it up and taking it home maximizes the individual's gain. There is a moral and a practical side to this issue, and the practical side is completely connected to trust. In political systems where mutual trust between the governed and the government has been established, exploitive behavior of public facilities declines.

In the case of Syrians, such trust has been violated for five decades. Maintaining the commons is something that Syrians are not highly accustomed to, even though they know that they should. Family talk frequently points to this issue and it praises the behavior that is respectful to public facilities. But when it comes to practice, some fall short of the standard of proper conduct as habituation to such action has not been nurtured. Also, **being at the receiving end of atrocities generates polarly opposed behavior: readiness for sacrifice for the public good *or* selfish behavior**. Thus, on the moral side, some Syrians might fall into justification of what he considers minor ethical vices, due to the perception that all people betrayed me so it is OK if I act selfishly. Again, while some Syrians tirelessly work to better the situation of their community, and while huge amount of Syrian financial resources are put to that end, there is on the other side significant margins of unwanted behavior.

Of course, from the Turkish side, probably there is nothing more enraging than the mishandling of the public commons. Turks keenly feel that the new status Turkey attained is hard-won through hard work and superior ways. This is a classic situation in the encounter between two peoples where the magnitude of the situation overwhelms the available resources.

IV-Cultural Mirroring

The above paragraphs so far centered around two themes: the diversity of the background of Syrians and the diversity of their experiences in Turkey. We need now to examine the common ground between Syrians and Turks.

Overwhelmed by minutia we can easily overlook the big picture. The Turks and Syrians have in common much more than what they differ in. Moreover, those aspects that they share are much important than the aspects in which they differ. **The commonality between the Turks and the Syrians is a simple fact of history and regional culture**. The Levant relishes in a Muslim culture that permeates all aspects of life. And this is the bedrock of Turkish-Syrian commonness. Not only Turks and Syrians largely share Islam as religious precepts, but they also share much in the cultural manifestation of such common belief system, which can be conceptualized as *cultural intimacy*.[1]

As a concept, culture is very encompassing, but it is customarily expressed in terms of values, norms and customs, in addition to language. To examine cultural common ground, it is helpful to quickly visit those spheres of culture. Turks and Syrians have identical value system, very close norms, but differ in some customs. Obviously, the Islamic background is the reason for the values being identical. While values are abstract notions with moral depth, norms are the rules of behavior that reflect values in the real life. For example, respecting elders is a value, and the proper way of addressing them is the norm. And here where we see impressive degrees of commonality.

Of course, values differ along the liberal-conservative continuum, and norms differ across social classes. Again, there is a close match, in that respect, between Turks and Syrians. The value configuration of both Turks and Syrians traverses close to each other along such continuum. That is, take a Turk and a Syrian who belong to the same social class position, and you will see high level of commonality. Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge that the Turkish society was exposed to larger doses of European liberal notion and practices. Secularity might be more prevalent in the Turkish society in general, while in Syria it is encountered in specific groups of the population.

Also, at the level of norms there is a close matching between Turks and Syrians from the same level of social class. Whether is it showing respect to parents, drop-by visitation, accepted behavior between the bride and groom who are still in the engagement period, mixing personal stories during business deals along with formal transactions… all of these are examples of norms that are similar between Turks and Syrians.

Table 1: Cultural Mirroring between Turks and Syrians

Cultural Item	State	Avenues that heighten appreciation
Values	Identical	Language
Norms	Compatible	Communication in different situations
Customs	Interpretable	Participation in life events

However, there are some norm differences in specific matters. One of them is the interaction between the two genders. And again, this is not unrelated to social class and the level of education. We need to remind ourselves that social norms change and adapt with time despite their rootedness. Indeed, the norms of the Turkish society are changing, and there are significant

[1] "Syrian Refugees and Cultural Intimacy in İstanbul: "I feel safe here!". Ayhan Kaya. RSCAS 2016/59. *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Global Governance Programme-239*, November 2016.

differences between the generations. The same thing is happening among the Syrians who live in Turkey.

Lastly, we can speak of customs, and here we find the wider diversion between the Turkish and Syrian cultures. Customs are products of the local environment in addition to historical inheritance of traditions. So certain customs that are prevalent in Anatolia might be very different from those of the western coast of Turkey. The same thing is true for different Syrian cities and regions. And recall the discussion above about the cultural configuration of the Syrian society.

What is puzzling in social life is that the trivial sometimes gets attention more than the substance. Thus, **although customs are marginal cultural products, their differences often overshadow the commonality of norms and values**. Interestingly, while we can morally assess values, and by extension norms, customs tend to be pure shared social practices that do not have moral depth. Yet, at times people are ready to fight on such simple social artifacts. For example, warmth in encountering each other is a shared norm between Turks and Syrians, and it is related to the shared values of kindness and helpfulness. Yet, it is reflected differently: touching the upper-head versus the cheeks. The customs at weddings, appropriate colors, the degree of formality are areas where differences could be found. Again, people get occupied, and sometimes repelled by the small differences in such matters.

We need here to note two points. First, on cultural matters, we can speak of *cultural commonality* and *cultural compatibility*. While commonality refers to shared aspects and small differences, compatibility refers to reconcilable differences. Here we can invoke civilizational modes. Generally speaking, **eastern cultures are compatible even if they are different**. So, even if there are differences between the Turkish and Syrian culture, these differences do not puzzle the other and are easily interpretable by both sides. Second, there are differences with the same culture, and the differences *within* the Turkish culture and *within* the Syrian culture might be larger that the differences *between* them. The clearest manifestation of such aspect was visible in Turkish movies that are translated into Arabic. Syrians were astonished by the close proximity, not just in norms, but in customs too. And a good illustration of this point is contrasting the differences between norms and customs vis-à-vis European settings. There you see the Turkish and Syrian culture reside on one side and the European on the other, with a significant breach in-between. And what is more illustrative is the ability to understand the cultural logic behind the different cultural manifestations. Syrians have no problem whatsoever in interpreting Turkish culture and its *etic* and the *emic*.

But if there are such wide and deep cultural resonance, why misunderstanding prevail? Partially it is because the delimited exposure to each other. **Many Syrians are invisible to Turks, exactly because they look and behave in similar ways**. Conversely, the untypical Syrian is what draws the attention.

1- Gender Interrelationships

Gender interrelations are one of the most problematic aspects that some Syrian young men face in Turkey. But this differs considerably among the different groups of Syrians. Those from larger cities have somewhat relaxed ways of male-female interaction, even if they were punctuated. That is, while such ways departed from the model of a separated world for males and females, they still seeks to abide by the protections of the older distancing model. Females might be also visible in outline areas, but such visibility is highly gender-specialized. In general, the Turkish norms of interactions between males and females appear to be too relaxed to some Syrians. Syrians judge that such norms have deviated much from the Ottoman style they have in mind, and that too much incorporation of liberal attitudes has taken place. Of course, all of that is very tied to social class.

Such mismatch in gender norms among the unbounded and alienated young people can become very problematic. Feeling free from social controls and living in a state of *urban anonymity* lead some of those young males to act inappropriately with Turkish females. There is a perceptual duality here in fostering such behavior. On one side, there is a chastity devaluating notion, where those socially-detached youngsters justify their inappropriate behavior under the perception that those females are loose anyway. Obviously, this is a crude chauvinistic view that misunderstands femininity on one hand and is ultimately exploitative on the other. Adding to this what is mentioned of feeling unbound by the Syrian norms and social controls, leaves us in a pitiful situation that is enraging for Turks and angering for Syrians who have no ways to it. Needless to say, such uncivilized male behavior exists in the dark allies of all societies.

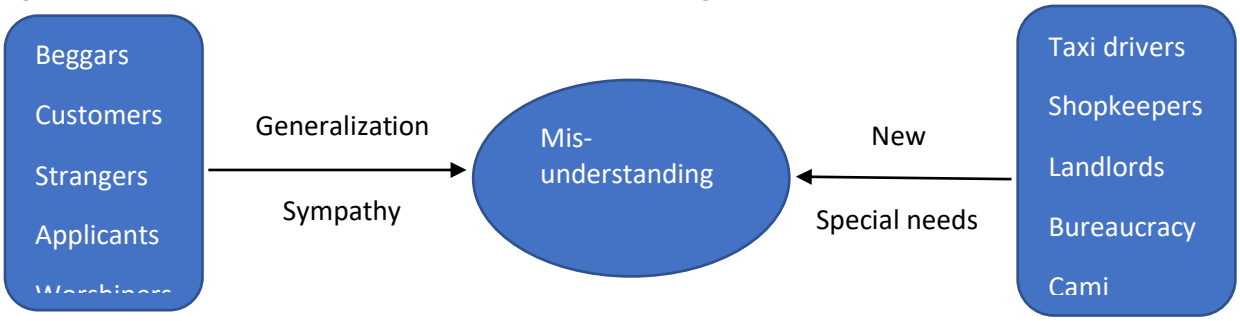
2-Unaligned Exposure

The close compatibility between the Turkish and the Syrian cultures might not be apparent enough to both sides, especially for Turks. This a fact of mathematical probability where members of the smaller group have more chances and avenues into the larger society. Apart from that, the specific context through which new Syrians entered Turkey makes exposure to each other unaligned, as explained below.

The unaligned exposure is a function of *distance* and *telescope*. That is, each group sees the other from a distance that clouds the view, and the telescope that each group uses to see the other is headed in the wrong direction. For Turks, the telescope through which they see the Syrian culture is tilted downward; for Syrians, it is tilled sideways. Therefore, Turks in general see the worst aspects of Syrians, while Syrians in general see the Turkish domineering attitude.

To get a closer look at the stereotypical views of each side, let us bring to our minds the spaces of *perception formation*. We can define five spaces from the Turkish side: beggars, reluctant customers, community strangers, headache applicants, and committed worshipers. From the other side, Syrians see Turks through the sites of manipulative taxi drivers, greedy shopkeepers, impossible landlords, complex bureaucracy, and the cozy *cami*.

Figure 1: Sites of Interaction that Produces Misunderstanding



Turkish people are deeply disturbed when they see children begging in public transportation areas. The begging phenomenon is not unknown to the Turkish culture, but to reach children is something extreme and unacceptable. Also, those children, unlike Turkish begging, skillfully occupied sanctified secular spaces (public transportation or tourist areas), vis-à-vis the entrance of mosques as a marketplace for mercy.[1] It should be noted that Syrians are embarrassed and very angered with such

[1] For more details about this phenomenon, see "The Napkin Children", which a field study of Syrian children in the streets of Istanbul, supervised by the author and published by Bina.org. Now it is available in Arabic and should be translated soon.

phenomenon. Also, they decry the fact that some children are being manipulated in the process, and are aware of gipsy groups exploiting the Syrian situation as a market opportunity for their lifestyle[1], even though they were not victims of the regime.

Second, most Syrians in Turkey are middle-class consumers who normally pay rent, buy food, and acquire new clothes. But they are reluctant spenders as their financial means were hit hard, and such carefulness could become irritating to sellers.

Third, whatever Syrians do, they feel they are strangers. While many melted-in since they physically look Turkish people, and while many of the young have mastered the Turkish language, there is still a critical mass of Syrians who do not hide or camouflage their difference. Because of their characteristics and social position, this part of Syrians will stay visibly Syrians. Communities may welcome a small number of newcomers but become uncomfortable when their number grows large. So, it is normal for some Turks to feel a sense of invasion. Indeed, human beings carry with them cultural scent that unintendedly spreads, and the host feels that its lifestyle has been altered.

The bureaucratic offices are the fourth site of interaction. The employees of Turkish agencies, such as Emniyet, are inundated with Syrian applicants many of which have special cases that consume a lot of the officers' energy. From the Syrian side, obtaining formal documents from the Syrian government is a very difficult task. This may require paying unofficial fees. Some documents cannot be obtained in absence, and the Syrian regime uses this method to punish those who fled the country even if they are far away. Currently, the Syrian regime is periodically sending to the Interpol lists of allegedly fraudulent passports. Those passports are completely legal and authentic, but the regime uses this tactic to harass Syrians from distance, and to send messages to the international community that I can subvert the international order is seemingly benign way. The end result is that officers in foreign countries became tired from any Syrian transaction because it is a potential headache and may involve messy paperwork. Turkish officers are becoming tiered from anything related to Syrians, and with that sympathy wears off. From the Syrian side, even legitimate channels are closing in their faces.

Masjids are the fifth site of interaction and perception formation between Turks and Syrians, and it is the most positive one. While the Shafie *mazheb* of many Syrians might bother some Turkish masjid goers, the Syrian apparent religious commitment balances it out.

From the other side, Syrians see Turks through another five sites. Taxis is one of them, and it goes without saying that taxi drivers are not the best judgement criteria of a culture. In terms of getting their basic needs, Syrians may feel that they are not getting the best deal when engaging with shopkeepers. Specifically, securing a residence is an unpleasant site of interaction as it is not easy at all for a Syrian to be accepted as a tenant. Sometimes, they have to pay for a year in advance, with elevated prices, in order to secure a place for living. From the landlord perspective, a Syrian tenant represents a risky investment. The site of bureaucracy is the most unpleasant for Syrians. Regulations ask Syrians to submit documents that are not easy to obtain. Add the continuously changing laws, this leaves many Syrians in a legal limbo, hopping from one governmental office to another for a long time. Lastly, the cozy *cami* is the best shared site between Syrians and Turks were souls really find comfort.

[1] See. "Dom Migrants From Syria Living at the Bottom On the Road amid Poverty and Discrimination". Kemal Vural Tarlan and Hacer Foggo. *Present Situation Analysis Report*, November, 2016.

Conclusion

Turks and Syrians have much more in common than they like to acknowledge. Cultural similarities are impressive as demonstrated at the level of values, norms, and customs too. The strained context in which Syrians entered Turkey created areas of misunderstanding. The formation process of perceiving each other is opaque, thus, distorting the general view.

More importantly, you can hardly identify an aspect of the Syrian dilemma that is not related to Turkey. Both peoples extensively share history, and they are bound to share the future. The Levant of the past is as present as it existed at the end of the Ottoman order, and it is being reconstructed through dynamics that pass through both countries and both populations. This is simply a historical fate. Appropriate policies are needed, and such important subject deserves a separate treatment.

Bibliography

Ayhan Kaya. “Syrian Refugees and Cultural Intimacy in Istanbul: “I feel safe here!”.” RSCAS 2016/59. *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Global Governance Programme*-239, November 2016.

Balanche, Fabrice. “A Half-Million Syrian Returnees? A Look Behind the Numbers”., July 7, 2017. *Washington Institute for Near East Studies*. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-half-million-syrian-returnees-a-look-behind-the-numbers.

Cagaptay, Soner. “Arab Spring Heats Up Kurdish Issue”. T*he Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 12, 2012. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-spring-heats-up-kurdish-issue.

Çirakman, Asli. From the ‘Terror of the World’ to the ‘Sick Man of Europe’: European Images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.

Courbage, FR. Youssef. World. “What demographics Say about the Syrian conflict”. Slate, 15.10.2012. http://www.slate.fr/story/62969/syrie-guerre-demographie-minorites

Goldsmith, Leon T. Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace. Hurst & Company, 2015.

Hashem, Mazen. “Syrian Exceptionalism and Revolution”, *Islamic Monthly*, May 2011.

Hashem, Mazen. “The Levant Reconciling a Century of Contradictions.” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 29, Spring 2012.

Hokayem, Emile. Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant. Adelphi Series, 2103.

Kemal Vural Tarlan and Hacer Foggo. “Dom Migrants From Syria Living at the Bottom On the Road amid Poverty and Discrimination”. *Present Situation Analysis Report*, November, 2016.

McHugo, John. Syria: *A Recent History*. Saqi, 2014.

Meyer, Günter. “Rural Development and Migration in Northeast Syria”, in *Anthropology and Development in North Africa and the Middle East*, Eds. Muneera Salem-Murdock and Michael M. Horowitz. Westview Press, 1990.

Nusuh Study Center 2016-10 , التغيير الديمغرافي في سورية:

Patrick Seale. *The Struggle for Syria*, 1988.

Pierret, Thomas. Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution. Cambridge Middle East Studies, 2013.

Winter, Stefan. A History of the ‘Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic. NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

باروت، التكون التاريخي الحديث للجزيرة السورية.

البوتاني، عبد الفتاح علي يحيى. وثائق عن الحركة القومية الكوردية التحررية: ملاحظات تاريخية ودراسات أولية. كوردستان: إربيل، مؤسسة موكرياني للطباعة والنشر، 2001