

BREAKDOWN OF HUMANITARIANISM IN TURKEY

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By Aysan Sonmez, Istanbul, 8 November 2014

Aysan Sonmez is a professor and human rights activist in Istanbul. Together with two colleagues she recently visited Syrian refugee camps on the Turkish side of besieged Kobane. This report is published in Keghart.com by author's permission.-Ed.

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There has also been a serious breakdown in humanitarianism regarding the refugees, especially in western Turkey. In the higher echelons of the government refugees have been treated as problems or deemed "not sufficiently important." As a result, the government has kept its distance from the region. Likewise, there has been little media coverage of the issue. At multiple levels there has been uncertainty whether or not it would be politically appropriate to bring the problem of refugees into the national agenda and offer assistance. As a result, there has been an odd lack of perspicacity and a split in conscientious reactions to the unfolding of events, even though every week we hear of new

influxes of refugees and attempts to establish camps for them.

In the second week of October I visited the district of Suruç in the province of Urfa with my friends Nilgün and Firat. In recent months the region has witnessed large influx of refugees from Syria. In Istanbul we have a small group that gets together to provide assistance during such difficult times. And instead of just sending aid we prefer to visit people and better understand their needs. The contacts we had in Urfa facilitated our work. We stayed two days in Suruç.

Urfa and Suruç: Different Worlds

By car the trip from central Urfa to Suruç takes only 30 minutes, but in Urfa life goes on as usual. It's as if there isn't a refugee camp nearby holding 50,000 people or there aren't bombs exploding at border crossings. This difference was more striking when we returned to Urfa from Suruç. In Urfa the only indicator of the dire situation were two UN trucks--massive armored vehicles--parked in the center of the city.

In the hours after our return, the old mayor of Suruç was killed along with his son. When we got into a taxi in Urfa, we brought up the topic of the refugees with the driver. His demeanor immediately changed. He said, "We've got nothing to do with them. It's absolutely none of our business." We fell silent.

And when we were shopping in the bazaar, when we mentioned that we were visiting Suruç, the shop owners' attitudes changed and became distant. It was clear that some people there see the large number of refugees in and around Urfa as a problem.

When we were in Suruç the town was calm. Our hosts took us along the border where they said it was safe. They pointed out Kobané in the distance. There weren't many people around. Some sat on stones and others peered toward Kobané looking through binoculars. While we were there, Isis bombed three border crossings. For a few days they had been bombing the crossings so that people couldn't come over from Kobané. During the day, everything was calm. At night the inhabitants of Suruç patrolled the area to prevent ISIS militants from crossing. "Otherwise it will be really hard for us," one of them said. "If we hadn't been here, Kobané would have fallen long ago." They said there were many militants in ISIS who had come from Europe. Apparently a French boxer had been caught a few days earlier. They explained with amusement that five youths had been beaten. Near a corn field overlooking Kobané we met two women who had also come to watch what was happening in the city.

"This isn't a matter of war. They are attacking our honor," they said. The corpses of four young women had been brought over the night before. ISIS militants had abused their bodies, and cut off the head of one of the women. We were told ISIS militants take the beautiful young women as their wives, saying, "By the grace of Allah, I take thee as my wife." The ones they consider to be ugly are sold. The two women heaped curses on the militants, saying, "It goes against religion and humanity." They wept. We met elderly people who asked why hadn't the youth who had joined the Gezi Park

resistance come to help them.

50,000 refugees in Suruc



When we returned to Suruç from the border we visited municipal officers to obtain information about the area camps. We found out that the majority of the refugees crossing into Suruç from Kobané were Kurdish. Despite being divided by a border, the area is largely seen as a single region because there are so many family connections. Almost every family has close relatives on the other side. Thus some refugees have been able to take shelter with their relatives in the surrounding provinces. At present there are 50,000 refugees in the camps and in the outlying areas of Suruç. Generally, they are women who have recently given birth or have numerous children, while the others have stayed in Kobané to fight ISIS. Thus the streets of Suruç are filled with children. The municipality has set up a tent camp with a capacity of 1,000. When we were there, they were getting ready to open another tent camp which would house 600-700. At the moment no one seems to be homeless; they've all been settled in defunct wedding halls, empty shops, newly constructed buildings, and mosques, or they have moved in with relatives. There is another tent city that was set up by the state relief program, and it houses 4,500 people. The refugees complained that the government says it will help but doesn't do anything. We were also told that the Kurdistan Regional Government had sent 230 tents and 600 blankets. At present there are 5,000-6,000 Kobané residents who are camped in a field on the border that is surrounded by mines.

The Armenians, who fled Kobané because of the war, first went to Aleppo. But when they realized that it wasn't safe, they moved to Lebanon and to Jordan. The Assyrians, who fled across the border, moved in with family members in Mardin, Viranşehir and Midyat. We were told ISIS fighters used to be sent directly to hospitals and held there. One of the major problems, we were told, is that Turkey no longer allows wounded ISIS fighters to cross the border for treatment in Turkish hospitals.

Preventative medicine, food top needs

At the state-run hospital in Suruç we asked doctors if they were in need of medicine. The doctors were carrying out two kinds of work: Treating patients at the hospital and providing outpatient care at the places where the refugees are staying. They said there was no shortage of medicine and that they were able to procure the medicines they needed. However, there is a need for preventative medicine and that the most crucial issue is food. They said they are able to treat simple illnesses.

The protection of children had slightly improved thanks to the assistance sent by Kurdish doctors in Berlin. Currently, however, there isn't enough soup kitchens. We were told that the biggest problem is feeding the 50,000 refugees and establishing a proper system so that they may receive the nourishment they need.

Help needed for food distribution



We went to a depot with a doctor from the hospital. The supplies there are being used to meet the needs of the refugees in Siverek, Bozova, Halfeti and Birecik. The large depot was filled with supplies but when there are 50,000 people in need, it wouldn't be enough to last two days. At the depot we noted that there was a problem with the distribution of aid. Because aid is being sent randomly, much labor goes into separating the contents of the packages.

Volunteers are needed to sort the aid at the depots and for its distribution. Aid cards have been given to the refugees, but the local population is unable to obtain assistance even when they too face financial difficulties. Depending on the type of card, aid is sent to refugees' homes or settlements. Currently, as is always the case, the most pressing need is baby formula. The majority of refugees are women and children, and there is a need for all types of baby formula and milk.

Suruç infrastructure can't handle 180,000 people



We went to the Rojava tent city. It has 300 tents. Suruç's infrastructure for water, electricity and sewage was designed to handle the town's original population of 50,000, but now that the population has soared to 180,000. Lack of water and electricity are causing large scale misery. There is hope for aid from Diyarbakir, but that municipality is experiencing its own issues regarding resources as refugees from Sinjar have settled there and the municipality is having trouble meeting their needs.

Because Suruç is on a flat plain, even the lightest rain can cause flooding in the tents. A businessman from Lebanon is installing platforms to solve the problem, in addition to a plumbing system for the tents.

Before returning to Urfa we asked for recommendations concerning the needs of the refugees. Medicine, clothing and food, in addition to workshops and activities that will provide psychological treatment for the traumas of war are the most urgent needs. After returning from Suruç I thought that the problems facing the refugees in the western part of the country are more traumatic in the sense that there is a lack of conscientiousness. In Suruç a mood of calm prevails, and people go about mourning their losses and talking about tragic events, lacing their narratives with humor. Also just about everyone is working because there is so much to be done.

We must oppose the war

Right now the US and countries in Europe are watching as this disaster unfolds. It would appear that after its experiences in Iraq, the US is content at watching From a safe distance, while European countries are happy to use ISIS as a pretext to go after fundamentalist Islamists at home.

Turkey's policies concerning the Middle East appear to have gone bust. Nonetheless, the Turkish government is proceeding down a risky path, clutching to a discourse that threatens to provoke

~~more conflicts in the country. And unfortunately more bodies are arriving.~~

Above all, we should demand that the war be brought to a halt. As regards to problems created by the war, we should call on official institutions and NGOs in Turkey to take responsibility and request that international aid associations assist those who are fleeing the fighting. In that process, refugees must be treated equally regardless of their religious or ethnic background. Aside from ending the war, the main issue at hand is the chaos that is increasing the burden not just of the refugees but also on the local population.

As winter draws near, there are thousands of people who are hungry and literally out in the cold. At the same time, there are a million more people who will impact the Turkish economy. We know that many refugees who moved to the western part of the country is working for subcontractors for a mere pittance and many others are being employed by criminal organizations. In Istanbul there is a high number of Syrian beggars on the streets.

