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IDENTITY AT THE FRINGES OF CITIZENSHIP

Experiences of Afghan Refugees in Turkey

SURF Conference Panel Session 7A

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In the summer of 2013 I was in the city of Kayseri, Turkey, conducting ethnographic fieldwork to research the situation of Afghan refugees. During this time, I met a young man by the name of Hamid, who had recently arrived to the city. The refugees I was living among were some of thousands of Afghans awaiting the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to take them out of Turkey and resettle them in a Western country. However, Hamid was not one of the refugees formally awaiting resettlement. Instead, Hamid was an undocumented Afghan in Turkey on a smuggling route to Germany.

Hamid, like many others, had travelled from Afghanistan to Iran, and then all the way to the western coast of Turkey, taking buses through countries and walking over mountainous borders at night to avoid guards who have permission to shoot any illegal border-crossers. From Turkey smugglers put him on a boat that would travel to Greece, but on a failed attempt the boat sprang a leak and his fellow passengers drowned. Hamid was the only survivor, he told me, because he was a strong swimmer and was able to return to the Turkish coastline. Temporarily, he had come to live with some acquaintances. These acquaintances were Afghans who had chosen to await formal resettlement from the UNHCR. When I asked him what his plans were for the future, suggesting he might try to register as a refugee as well and seek resettlement, he paused for a moment, and then responded: “For now, I don’t know. I just know one thing: there is no point in spending any time in Turkey.” Hamid made it clear that he was going to attempt the journey again.¹

Unfortunately, stories like Hamid’s are not entirely surprising, given the situation that his Afghan refugee and asylum-seeking counterparts face in Turkey. My research seeks to shed light on what motivates so many Afghans like Hamid to forgo a chance of resettlement within Turkey by the United Nations, and instead risk their lives crossing borders for a direct chance of reaching Europe. This is done by investigating how Afghan refugees in Turkey experience and

¹ Confidential Informant. Informal Interview. Kayseri, Turkey. 16 June 2013.

conceptualize citizenship in terms of their political, economic, and social struggles. I hope to develop understandings of various modes of citizenship while documenting the experiences of this growing population of refugees.

In 2012 and 2013, I conducted interviews with refugees, was a participant observer of daily life, and spent time volunteering with an organization made up of refugee advocates known as the Coordination Group of Afghan Refugees in Turkey. I also interviewed officials at Turkish NGOs and analyzed UNHCR documents relevant to the situation of refugees in Turkey.

I. Afghan Refugees in Turkey

Estimates for Turkey's population of Afghan refugees place the figure at over 50,000 by the end of 2013: Afghans are the second largest refugee population in the country.² Turkey is a unique site for Afghan refugees because of the vast distance between the countries. However, Afghan refugees in Turkey travel to the country not only from Afghanistan but also from diasporic communities in Iran and Pakistan. For Afghans from all three countries, Turkey is one of few states in the region with relative safety and a vast UNHCR network. Asylum-seekers' reasons for migration from Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan warrant their own study. Yet in broad terms, relevant push factors for migration seem to include combinations of religious, social, and ethnic violence alongside manifestations of economic instability.³

II. Turkey's Refugee Policy in Context

Typically, the terms "asylum-seeker" and "refugee" are used as follows: when someone is fleeing their country, they are known as an asylum-seeker; when someone is granted asylum in a state, they are then known as a refugee.⁴ Seeking asylum in Turkey, however, involves a unique arrangement between the UNHCR, Turkey, and resettlement countries that makes this distinction less relevant. Even though this paper and relevant discourse uses the term "Afghan refugees in Turkey," Turkey does not grant non-European asylum-seekers "refugee" status due to a reservation it filed to the United Nations Refugee Convention. They cannot permanently stay in Turkey.⁵

2 UNHCR. "Turkey." UNHCR Welcome. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html> (accessed August 9, 2013).

3 Research participants from each country offered personal stories of human rights violations against Afghans that are unfortunately underreported through formal channels. For examples of the types of issues Afghans face the following sources are recommended:

Danish Refugee Council, "Living conditions for Afghan refugees in Iran are decreasing." ReliefWeb, 21 March 2013. Accessed 14 November 2013. <http://reliefweb.int/report/iran-islamic-republic/living-conditions-afghan-refugees-iran-are-decreasing#sthash.uqeByGn9.dpuf> Danish Refugee Council.

Mobeen Azhar. "Hell on Earth: Inside Quetta's Hazara Community." BBC, 30 April 2013. Accessed 14 November 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22248500>

4 UNHCR. "Asylum-Seekers." UNHCR. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c137.html> (accessed August 9, 2013).

5 UNHCR. "Turkey." UNHCR Welcome. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html> (accessed May 9, 2013).

Instead, refugees who come to Turkey enter an alternative three-step system. They first enter the country and are able to register as “temporary asylum seekers.” If their asylum application is accepted, they are then allowed temporary residence in Turkey as they await a third country like the United States, Canada, or a European state to offer them permanent resettlement. During this process, refugees are placed in a small city or town in Turkey, from which they are not allowed to leave.⁶ UNHCR pamphlets given to asylum seekers claim that the average wait time is three years for the entire resettlement process, from entering Turkey to being resettled in a third country. For some refugee groups, there is some truth to this. However, most Afghans in particular have been waiting for six years and counting for resettlement due to low quotas for Afghans in resettlement countries. Unfortunately, the delay of resettlement is just one of many failed promises made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.⁷

III. Life on the Ground: Reality of Refugee Life in Turkey

From what I witnessed in the field, aid from NGOs and the United Nations is insufficient for any refugee and his or her family to subsist on. To meet their needs, refugees need to work, even those that are of schooling age. However, Turkey does not allow refugees to work legally without acquiring a work permit. This permit is essentially impossible to acquire because of the degree of employer involvement necessary to obtain it and the lack of incentive to obtain work permits for low-skilled laborers. These nearly-insurmountable difficulties are in spite of the fact that the UNHCR pamphlets given to asylum-seekers make the acquisition of a work permit seem feasible. Similarly, for their healthcare needs, refugees are promised in UNHCR welcome pamphlets that the state will be responsible. Instead, Afghans have to struggle to fund their own treatment or rely on local charities that, however, have insufficient funding for Afghan medical needs.⁸ When I sat down with refugees to discuss the right to healthcare and the right to work permits that is outlined in the pamphlet UNHCR gives to asylum seekers, one individual remarked, “Oh yes, we have these rights! But only in our dreams while we sleep at night.”⁹

Therefore, nearly all refugees have no choice but to work as illegal laborers in what are typically harsh factory environments where exploitation is common. One day while walking to the grocery store, I ran into my friend Rahim who, unprompted, detailed how his employer pays him less than minimum wage and occasionally withholds his pay. Yet if he were to ask the police to mediate the situation, Rahim would be fined for working illegally—a fine that can be up to three times that month’s pay. In my initial visit to Kayseri, Turkey in the summer of 2012, the enforcement of sanctions against undocumented workers was so rare my informants and I were unable to even confirm the phenomena. Yet by my return in 2013, I encountered many individuals who were sanctioned by the police for being employed without a work permit.¹⁰

6 Zieck, M. “UNHCR And Turkey, And Beyond: Of Parallel Tracks And Symptomatic Cracks.” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 22, no. 4 (2010): 593-622.

7 An open letter from Afghan refugees in Turkey to UNHCR. 22 June 2011. Accessed 14 November 2013. <http://www.hazarapeople.com/2011/06/22/an-open-letter-from-afghan-refugees-in-turkey-to-unhcr>.

8 UNHCR. “Basic Information for the Asylum-Seekers in Turkey.” UNHCR Information Website. http://info.unhcr.org/tr/leaflets/MOI/MOI_English.pdf (accessed May 9, 2013).

9 Confidential Informant. Informal Interview. Kayseri, Turkey. 30 May 2013.

10 Field notes. Kayseri, Turkey. 16 June 2013.

IV. Citizenship and the Afghan Asylum-Seeker

This paper will present a snapshot of how the concept of citizenship plays a role in the lives and experiences of Afghan refugees, and ultimately, help explain why some Afghans choose to be smuggled rather than to apply for resettlement through the UNHCR. To look at the categories of refugee and asylum-seeker—groups that are typically thought as being “without citizenship”—this research utilizes two terms from James Holston and Arjun Appadurai: “formal citizenship” and “substantive citizenship.”¹¹

Formal citizenship refers to the entire range of formal legal titles a state can confer on a person, such as residence, citizenship, or even refugee or asylum-seeker status. Substantive citizenship, on the other hand, refers to the rights that come with various categories of citizenship, such as the right to reside in a state, the right to participate in the government, the right to work, and the right to healthcare. Previous discussions of rights struggles foreground formal citizenship as the primary vehicle for obtaining substantive citizenship rights.¹² The assumption is that the individual lacking in substantive rights can gain and should gain them by seeking formal citizenship first. However, by expanding the concept of formal citizenship to fit categories such as “refugee” and “asylum-seeker,” this research complicates the link between substantive and formal citizenship rights. I hope to demonstrate how substantive citizenship is not necessarily linked to formal citizenship, and formal legal status may not be the true gateway to substantive citizenship.

V. Citizenship and Refugees

Classic understandings of rights struggles would suggest that Afghans who experience weak substantive citizenship rights should alleviate their issues by increasing their formal citizenship status—in this case, by registering as a refugee. But in conversations I had with refugees who were involved in the process, a quite different impression of this “first step” was often presented. In one such instance, I was speaking with two heads of households, Mr. Ahmad and Mr. Reza, who were discussing their experiences as Afghans with the UNHCR bureaucracy.

Mr. Reza began by saying, “[The UNHCR] doesn’t resettle Afghans.... If this is the case... either don’t accept the Afghans, or don’t register them, and let the Afghans understand. Let them stay in their own country and die, and not come all this way here.” As the conversation went on, Mr. Ahmad tried to suggest that maybe the United Nations was registering refugees to stop them from getting on boats. Mr. Reza replied:

But why should the UNHCR even accept [the refugees]? What is the reasoning behind this pointless acceptance? It puts a black cloud over your life. The refugees here can’t work, they can’t study. They are here living in uncertainty. Being accepted as a refugee here just puts a black cloud over your entire life.¹³

11 Holston, James, and Arjun Appadurai. “Cities And Citizenship.” *Public Culture* 8, no. 2 (1996): 190.

12 Abowitz, K. K., and J. Harnish. “Contemporary Discourses Of Citizenship.” *Review of Educational Research* 76, no. 4 (2006): 654.

13 Confidential Informants. Informal Interview. Kayseri, Turkey. 13 June 2013.

In this conversation we see acquiring refugee status articulated as something other than a step on the path towards full substantive citizenship. While registering as a refugee elevates the individual in legal terms from an undocumented and therefore illegal alien up to a now legal “temporary resident,” refugees like Mr. Reza suggest that this promotion in formal citizenship status was a sort of demotion in substantive citizenship rights. And indeed registering as a refugee does entail a sacrifice of the freedoms that come with remaining undocumented. Unlike unregistered Afghans living in cities like Istanbul and Ankara, formally registered Afghan refugees are unable to move within Turkey where more lucrative jobs or better housing options are available. This restriction of freedom is unique to the registered Afghan refugee because as part of becoming a temporary asylum seeker, they agree to stay in the city they are assigned to.¹⁴

Yet what is gained in return for these freedoms? Dismal resettlement rates for Afghans in the past few years have shown there is no guarantee of resettlement for these refugees. Most would frankly be better off applying for refugee status once already inside of a Western European country. In fact, Mr. Ahmad went on to say that had he not been deceived by this false hope of resettlement, he would not have given up so much to settle in Turkey. “If the UNHCR didn’t register us,” Mr. Ahmad said, “we would have just kept going to Greece. Either we would have arrived, or we wouldn’t. Like many others, they either got there, or they drowned.”

VI. Conclusion

Mr. Ahmad’s wish was the path that Hamid, the young man discussed at the start of this paper, chose to take. With Hamid’s repeated attempts to reach Europe even by risking his own life, we see the failure of the resettlement process. As many states attempt to criminalize and find ways to turn away asylum-seekers, will migration continue to vilify individuals who agree to dangerous journeys by land and sea? Or can emphasis be shifted to failing refugee institutions that function as push factors by restricting rights of refugees and offering them little in return?

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Holston, James, and Arjun Appadurai. “Cities And Citizenship.” *Public Culture* 8, no. 2 (1996): 190.

UNHCR. “Asylum-Seekers.” *UNHCR*. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c137.html> (accessed August 9, 2013).

¹⁴ UNHCR. “Basic Information for the Asylum-Seekers in Turkey.” UNHCR Information Website. http://info.unhcr.org.tr/leaflets/MOI/MOI_English.pdf (accessed May 9, 2013).

UNHCR. "Basic Information for the Asylum-Seekers in Turkey." UNHCR Information Website. http://info.unhcr.org.tr/leaflets/MOI/MOI_English.pdf (accessed May 9, 2013).

UNHCR. "Turkey." *UNHCR Welcome*. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html> (accessed August 9, 2013).

Zieck, M. "UNHCR And Turkey, And Beyond: Of Parallel Tracks And Symptomatic Cracks." *International Journal of Refugee Law* 22, no. 4 (2010): 593-622.