



Elif Aksaz and Jean-François Pérouse (ed.)

## **“Guests and Aliens”: Re-Configuring New Mobilities in the Eastern Mediterranean After 2011 - with a special focus on Syrian refugees**

Institut français d'études anatoliennes

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# The “good” and the “bad” Arabs in Istanbul Streets since the End of 2012 (Beyoğlu: Tarlabası and Taksim Square)

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- 1 We have preferred here to focus shortly on a very local field experience. The matter we wanted to deal with is related to daily interactions between so-called “Syrian refugees” – who represent a coherent sociological category only for people seeing them from afar – local dwellers and foreign tourists. Two places, which are very close to each other and in a way connected, have been selected for these observations: on one hand the central square of Taksim, the heart of international tourism in Istanbul; and on the other hand Tarlabaşı, an old and highly degraded area partly subject to urban regeneration projects, and at the same time corroded by the expansion of hotel businesses especially targeting people from Gulf countries.



**REAR PART OF TAKSIM SQUARE. GEZI PARK CAN BE SEEN ON THE LEFT**

**JEAN-FRANÇOIS PÉROUSE**

- 2 Situated in the heart of the old Levantine, minority, and European sector, Tarlabaşı has become in the last twenty years an iconic theater of the multifaceted foreign presence, and especially of the Kurdish presence in Istanbul. This area is branded as such both by a certain literature (see the novel *Ağır Roman*, 1995), by the cinema, television series, media, and dominant political discourses. But, due to its very favorable location inside the huge metropolis – near one of the busiest centers of consumption and cultural economy of the metropolis – Tarlabaşı has become since the end of the 2000s the target of real-estate speculators, both big and small, who seem to feed off the stigmatization process to justify the urgency of their intervention, presented as a necessary clean-up or a salutary rescue.



**A STREET IN TARLABAŞI DISTRICT**

**JEAN-FRANÇOIS PÉROUSE**

- 3 Interactions between Turkish Kurds, who immigrated to Istanbul in some cases many years ago, and Syrian Kurds, have been locally observed during at least two years. At the same time, interactions between Arab-speaking Syrian refugees and Arab-speaking tourists from around the Gulf have also been observed. Social distance – even among Syrian refugees, who do not form a coherent group – seems to remain stronger than “natural” affiliations imagined/designated by outsiders.

## I. “A good Arab is a good tourist”

Table 1 : Arrival of Arab tourists in Turkey ( % ) Istanbul

Country	2000	2001	Increase ( % )
Tunisia	68,817	72,143	4,83
Algeria	57,094	62,866	10,11
Libya	43,690	55,955	28,07
Egypt	27,048	30,364	12,26
Jordan	20,753	24,063	15,95
Saudi Arabia	19,102	19,102	35,93
Syria	13,057	13,963	6,94
Lebanon	12,092	17,567	45,28
UAE	3,089	3,535	14,44
Yemen	271	1,624	499,26
Bahrain	245	1,985	710,20
Qatar	43	548	1679,07
Kuwait	643	7,971	1139,66

### THE OLD ARAB MIGRATION PATTERNS IN TURKEY, WHICH HAVE BEEN RESHUFFLED THE LAST TWO YEARS

Anadolu Ajansi (22/02/2002) & Delos, 2004



**SUITCASE TOURISM SPOT IN FATI H DISTRICT, 2014**

**JEAN-FRANÇOIS PÉROUSE**

- 4 In 2013, according to official figures, 17% of the foreigners welcomed as “tourists” during that year in Istanbul were coming from “Arab” countries.<sup>1</sup> Without doubt, the definition of *Arab country* could change according to sources but the main criterion – especially regarding our concern here, daily street-interactions – is the perceived speaking language. The definition of “tourist” is also subject to discussions; the only definition is statistical. A tourist is a foreigner who has entered Turkey with a touristic visa – and is registered as such –, regardless of his intentions or occupations. That is the reason why there is a contradiction between the general representations of the foreign tourist and the statistical reality; sometimes a striking contradiction. In this respect, when looking deeper into the phenomenon of “Arab tourism” in Istanbul in 2013, we see that the first group in quantitative terms is composed by Libyans, and the second group by Syrian citizens. These two groups clearly do not correspond to the current image of the foreign tourist in dominant representations. While they come without any consumer purchasing power, registered Syrian tourists are clearly unexpected tourists.
- 5 In other terms, notwithstanding the statistical definition of a tourist and the manifold faces of tourism in Istanbul, for most Istanbul hotel, restaurant or bar keepers – a good Arab is a Saudi,<sup>2</sup> an Emirati or a Qatari one, all supposedly prodigal clients<sup>3</sup>. After the Gezi “unrest” in June 2013, “rich Arabs” have even been displayed by mainstream Turkish newspapers as the “savers of Istanbul tourism”.<sup>4</sup> Besides, an Arab tourist in Istanbul could also be an Arab commuter, coming mostly from Libya, Iraq or Tunisia, as part of the suitcase-trade-tourism; again, he is generally perceived as a good purchaser. Keeping this perception framework in mind should help us understand the way Syrians are perceived in actuality.

## II. Street interactions

- 6 For about one and a half year Taksim square has been a huge pedestrian stage – still waiting for a design-implementation – where interactions or at least temporary proximity between people coming from different countries and different socio-economic backgrounds are intense. On the nude slopes of the old “Gezi Park” just below the nude square, numerous families of Syrians are sitting and waiting, looking at the metropolitan scene; at least when the weather allows it. In the same spot, “rich Arab tourists” are frequently moving on, going about with their family, coming out of their hotels mostly located in the Talimhane area; or, depending on the hour, coming back to their hotel.



**CEMILE, AND HER FOUR CHILDREN, CAME FROM ALEPPO. PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN UNDER THE TARLABAŞI BRIDGE**

**JEAN-FRANÇOIS PÉROUSE**

- 7 Most of the time, when Syrian refugees – asking in Arabic for some help or money – meet a “rich Arab tourist” in Taksim Square or in the narrow streets of Tarlabası, the interaction does not last for a very long time. Either some small change is given in order to enable escaping or even nothing... The “rich tourists” are trying to flee, in order to avoid any longer interaction, like other foreign tourists and most of the “local” inhabitants. The supposed “cultural” proximity does not function in any way.
- 8 Despite all these global categorizations in terms of ethnic identity – like “the Arabs” –, class differences remain the most determining factor to explain the basic logics of street-interactions. That is why the often-underestimated Syrian middle and upper-middle-class – that is usually acting in Turkey like the other tourists towards their compatriots – seems rather invisible in daily life interactions for Turkish people.

- 9 There is another form of interaction between Arabs, related to the employment of poor Arabs as “street attendants” (or *değnekçi*) for the supposed “high purchasing power” Arab people, in order to encourage the latter to enter into some shops, restaurants or entertainment spots. These interactions take place especially in the huge pedestrian İstiklâl avenue that is considered as one of the preferred places by the good “Arab tourists” (according to a recently issued sector report). This interaction, made possible by the supposed common speaking language, results from a clear class-based division of roles. Otherwise, the relationship here is reduced to a relationship between an “intermediary” service provider and a potential client.

### III. “They are not true Kurds, they have been *Arabized*”

- 10 As we know, a part of the Syrian citizens we can meet in the streets of Beyoğlu are Kurdish people, mostly speaking Kurdish language, but if necessary even Arabic and now Turkish (their often numerous children have learned very quickly). Towards these Syrian Kurds, the reactions we have witnessed are reactions of rejection or at least of great indifference, even from Turkish Kurds who mostly regard with suspicion these Kurds, accused to have been *Arabized* (if we quote one of our interviewed street-contacts). Consequently, for average street-Turks, there is not a double stigmatization of these Syrians (I mean from Kurdish origin), both as Syrians and as Kurds. What is going on is rather an unexpected stigmatization – a way of creating a distance – on the part of their supposed “relatives” (and natural allies).
- 11 As an unexpected result, and as a recently issued (November 2014) report written by Murat Erdoğan has underlined, some non-Kurdish Turkish-citizens are looking more positively at their “own” Kurds (which means Turkish-citizen Kurds), in comparison to the poorer group of Syrian refugees they meet in the streets... In other words, the introduction of newcomers into the daily-life interactions system has transformed previous relationships of “dissimilarity”. With the appearance of new others, old distances have been reshaped into unexpected proximities. The borders of otherness have suddenly shifted.

### To conclude

- 12 Through this case study, we can see the contradictions between the general discourse of Istanbul policymakers – promoting the city as an international metropolis – and the daily management of “unexpected foreigners”. There is obviously an unsaid hierarchy between foreigners that lies behind all their interactions on the urban scene. Besides, these field observations lead to reconsider all the “identity-based” categories that journalists, politicians and even scholars are currently using regarding Syrians refugees, and that contribute to shape general perceptions. In going beyond the rough national and mono-language-based “cultural” categories of differentiation that are mainly shaping perceptions and common discourse on refugee issues, the cruelty of class differences springs out with salience. Being a good consumer makes you quite invisible in current Istanbul, makes you both less Arab and less Kurdish.

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## NOTES

1. Tevfik Güngör, "The number of people coming from Arab countries is increasing very rapidly", *Dünya*, 5 May 2014, p. 2. Along with Istanbul, the provinces of Yalova (for thermal tourism) and Bursa (thermal, mountains and "cultural" tourism), south of Istanbul, are providing a complementary offer. See also: "Mönüyü getir' esprisi Araplarla gerçek oldu", *Radikal*, 14 october 2012, p. 34. [http://www.turkiyeturizm.com/news\\_detail.php?id=42072#.VGNNjsnp9n4](http://www.turkiyeturizm.com/news_detail.php?id=42072#.VGNNjsnp9n4). ("Dört kişilik bir aile minimum 400-500 TL ödeyip kalkıyor").

2. In 2013, the third of the "Arab national group" is the Saudi one.

3. See : "Arap turistin gözdesi" *Milliyet*, 11 November 2014, p. 1. <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/bursa-arap-turistlerin-gozdesi-bursa-yerelhaber-472013/>.

4. See : Yücel, Aysel, "Arap turistler geri geldi, , satışlar normale döndü," *Dünya*, 19 July 2013, p. 2. URL: <http://www.dunya.com/guncel/arap-turistler-geri-geldi-satislar-normale-dondu-198276h.htm>.

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**Geographical index:** Istanbul

**Keywords:** Syrian refugees in Turkey, Syrian Kurds, tourism, Arab-speaking Syrian refugees in Turkey, Arab-speaking tourists in Turkey

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