The Education of Syrian Children in Istanbul

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Elif Aksaz

“The Migration and mobilities research unit” at IFEA adopts a broader view of the migration phenomenon. It encourages comparative and simultaneous analyses of immigration and emigration, of internal and international migration. It encourages comparative and simultaneous analyses of economic and political migration, forced and voluntary migration, etc.

This perspective is also present in this conference. Conference participants discussed the different migrant categories. They drew attention to the way immigration and emigration localities are connected, and to the way immigration interferes with internal migration, for example the dynamics in an urban setting between Syrians and Turkish or Kurdish populations originating from rural areas.

I would like to now give part of my short speaking time to Büşra and Öykü, two students from Galatasaray University who have been carrying out fieldwork research on Syrian populations in Istanbul during their internship at IFEA and Galatasaray University.

Following the spring 2011 uprisings in Syria, escalating to a complex, violent civil war, there has been one of the biggest migration waves of this decade, especially towards countries bordering Syria. Turkey is one these countries which has so far received more than 1.6 million migrants. The remarkable issue is that this immense migration mobility will probably not have an end soon as the situation gets more complicated each day. Our field research concentrated on the education of Syrian migrant children in Turkey. These migrant children – who are under 18 – constitute half of the migrant population. In order to research their educational situation, we conducted interviews with some public schools, especially in the Zeytinburnu district – a lower middle class district in Istanbul which is characterized by its migrant population and textile industry – with the District National Education Directorates, several Turkish/Syrian based associations and Syrian schools that are strongly associated with these associations and municipalities.
First, we discovered that Turkey’s migration policy, which only provides the right of refugee status to European citizens, puts Syrian migrants in an uncertain situation. Giving a guest status, which claims to be a “permanent protection”, puts Syrian migrants in a position where they are seen as needy. Also, this absence of status at times causes arbitrary implementations on the part of local state representatives and puts Syrian migrants in an elusive situation.

The other thing that we realized during our field research was that the relationship between municipalities, and Syrian schools and associations is based on self-interest. The associations with which we talked prepare the economic infrastructure of Syrian schools and manage bureaucratic relations with local authorities. While schools are trying to create an ideal Syria – with their students, Syrian curriculum and Syrian teachers – during the time that they live in Turkey, the associations perform the task of negotiating with the country of origin. The effect of this collaboration between the opposition in Syria and the current government in Turkey is open to discussion, as well as its impact on Syrian migrants who live in Turkey.

Finally, it is necessary to point out the lack of standards in the rulings regulating this situation, which makes the State’s policies uncertain and leaves room for various actors. In other words, policies related to Syrian migrants in Turkey are open to initiatives and personal decisions and to the implementation of these policies in local areas. Also, it is important to realize that many Syrian migrants might stay permanently in Turkey. That’s why they shouldn’t be considered as guests who are seen as needy but rather as a diverse community, which can evolve in multiple directions; this is why a more proper approach and respectful of human rights should be adopted by the authorities.

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