Newcomers Handbook

The Refugees’ Right To Housing: State Policies and Housing Commons in Istanbul, Athens and Belgrade

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Introduction

Istanbul, Athens and Belgrade are three big cities geographically situated at the entrance of Europe, three threshold cities in between East and West, in between welcoming and discriminatory practices towards refugees, in between solidarity and racism, in between hope and fear, in between caring and violence, in between mobility and waiting. From 2015 to 2020 more than 1.5 million refugees have crossed the so-called Balkan corridor. However, following the EU – Turkey refugee agreement and the sealing of borders, some hundreds of thousands of newcomers are trapped in these cities. The refugees’ long path from the war zones of Middle East, Central Asia and Africa to Central and North Europe is a passage through fences, guards, borders, police controls, detention centers and State-run camps. These border-making mobility obstacles, bordering technologies and endless restrictions are visible and expose the state and hyperstate migration policies. At the same time the long route of refugees overflows with less visible and invisible intimate personal and collective stories. Stories that unveil the dramaturgies of survival, friendship, empathy, proximity and solidarity. Stories that highlight the contestation of borders and the possibility of invention of new relations amidst
emerging urban cracks. Istanbul, Athens and Belgrade are fencing cities but they are also open cities, thus they have become living laboratories of contested urban geographies for the newcomers.

In particular, dozens of State-run refugee camps have been built in the perimeter of these cities during the last five years, spaces that exclude refugees from the right to the city. At the same time, numerous refugees’ collective housing structures have emerged in the city center. Housing structures that operate as common spaces, spaces that reinvent the principles of mutual help, collective caring and being-in-common and retrace the trajectories of transnational solidarity.

This handbook aims to make visible and circulate some of the many neglected and personal stories of refugees on collective commoning practices in order to speak of the present and a possible future concerning the newcomers’ right to the city, to housing and to social life.
I am from Syria and I live in the migrant squat Themistocleous 58 but I also lived in the Azadi (freedom) squat which was evicted. I would like to share my experience with eviction. The police usually choose a specific time to raid and evacuate the squat, around 5:00 in the morning. So in the case of the Azadi squat, the police closed both sides of the road and the first step of the policemen was to break down the door, which was a glass pane door with iron railings. So the cops started kicking the door, breaking the glass with force and then cutting the iron railings. But women and children had gathered behind the door, and while the cops saw them they continued breaking the glass windows of the door which was thrown all over the women and children. They also shouted at us and swore to us with bad words. They were very angry. I must emphasize that this squat was a housing project mainly for single women with children. We were about 80 people living in the squat and only a few were men. So you can imagine how traumatic this has been for women and young children when so many male policemen broke the door with...
force and entered the squat using batons. I remember all the women who bravely shouted to the policemen asking them what they wanted there and what they were looking for. But the cops seemed determined and they rushed in and started beating us, and while women were shouting and the children were crying they continued to destroy everything in the squat. As I remember very well there were no female police officers and the fact that male policemen were beating women was extremely embarrassing. It was still night when they entered but they cut the power supply and they were wearing night vision goggles. They kicked and smashed all the doors and lifted the people out of their beds by force. Most importantly, they stole the refugees’ money and took all our personal belongings. They did not even let the residents collect their asylum and registration papers when they were arrested. Most of the occupants at that time were sleeping and they were arrested and taken to the police vans in their pajamas, this was very humiliating. Of course, when the evacuation operation finished and as it usually happens with eviction cases, the police sealed the building with concrete blocks and eventually the residents, or even a lawyer, cannot return to get their personal belongings or record the condition of the building after the violent police intervention. It is clear that the police do not want their inhuman behavior to be known while the refugee residents are being punished as they must restart the asylum process and buy or find clothes and necessary items again. These operations began during tenure of previous government, a government that was supposed to be left-wing and respect the rights of refugees.

The occupation of Azadi was evacuated in April 2019 by the SYRIZA government. To be precise, the evacuation was linked to the pre-election climate in which the right-wing parties accused SYRIZA of leaving the refugees in squats in the center of Athens and amidst media pressure to start the evictions. I remember that all the media were talking those days about the occupation of Azadi as if it was a place of terrorists. Here I want to emphasize also that many women-residents and especially the children had never have such an experience of violence before. Finally, most of the women and children were forced to stay in State-run camps located far from the city.

But the situation in the camps is very tragic. They are located outside of the city, there is no school nearby and there are many children who need to go to school. I
believe that the aim of the government is to push the refugees to become members of mafia gangs. For some camps you must pay 8 euros to go and come back by bus, when in the best case if you work you earn a maximum of 15 euros per day. Also, police have put cameras in the camps and refugees can only enter with a card. On the contrary, in the squats we feel free to organize everything on our own. In the squats, we learn to live together, to solve problems together. The squat of Themistocleous, where people from Africa, Pakistan, Syria and Afghanistan live, is a multinational community. While in the camp, there is a peculiar confinement, police force you to live separately and there are refugees from different countries that create gangs based on ethnicity and fight with each other. For us women, it is very dangerous to go around in the camps at night, we are even afraid to go to the toilet.
I am from Iraq and I arrived in Athens with my family in the spring of 2016. In the beginning we stayed in the camp of Skaramagas, on the outskirts of Athens. However, I did not like the situation in the camp, there were too few services and infrastructures and the situation was extremely difficult. Thus, I decided to leave and we arrived with my family at Idomeni, at the borders with Macedonia. My family and I tried three times to move to Macedonia and Serbia. Eventually, we managed to cross the borders with a smuggler, but he stole all our money and belongings, so we were left alone in an unknown country and we had to find money again. Eventually, some friends from Greece sent us money and we finally managed to get to Serbia. We stayed for 10 months in Belgrade in a State-run camp. There the situation was very miserable and we had to pay for everything. Although Serbia receives money from the EU to help refugees, the authorities in the camp did not offer anything for free, but we had to buy whatever we wanted. For example, a family with babies
that needs diapers has to go and buy them outside of the camp, and the same with
shoes, clothes, everything. I mean that there were open stalls outside of the camp
and they were selling these staff, instead of giving them inside the camp for free.
At that time, there were about 500 refugees living in the camp. The camp was an
old building in a miserable condition, full of cockroaches everywhere on the walls.
It was also very cold as there was no heating. If you wanted a better room you had
to pay 500 euros to the camp manager. There was a mafia-like situation. Also one
could not stay outside the camp during the night, but had to return before 20.00
o’clock. The police guards had a list of refugees and they came every night to check
if someone was missing. If there was someone missing, then this person would lose
his or her place in the camp and could not come back. So they forced us to stay at
the camp and not go around the city. It was like an evening curfew. Also, the camp
was very far from the city, about half an hour bus ride away from Belgrade. I also
remember very well the night when the policemen arrested me for no reason. It was
4.00 o’clock in the morning when the police entered the room and told me to take
off my clothes and took me to the prison in my underwear. I spent 27 days in prison.
I still do not know why. And when they took me out of prison, they took me with a
car somewhere far from the city and left me in the middle of a street, then they told
me to leave, without money, without anything. I had a lot of problems in Serbia and
I was seeing a psychologist for a while. Then I tried to continue my way to Hun-
gary. At the borders, I heard that things are much more difficult in Hungary. I heard
that refugees are locked up in detention centers which are closed completely and so
I finally decided to return to Greece. Another reason is that the Serbs seemed very
closed-minded, cold and reserved to me as people, and they did not want to have
any contact with the refugees. If a refugee goes somewhere to buy something, in a
shop or in a bar, they will sell it very expensive. In general, I felt everywhere that
they did not want me. When I got on the bus I saw them looking at me strangely, no
one would sit next to me, and when I visited a cafeteria or a restaurant people were
moving away from me. The only place that was different was the occupation of the
barracks behind the old train station by the refugees. It was a very old building and
mostly Afghans and Pakistani people lived there. Of course, we are talking about
single men without families who were not accepted in the camps. Because I was
with my family, they accepted us at the camp. I would like to have stayed at the barracks as I saw that something interesting was happening there, but because of my experience from prison, basically an abduction, I was afraid to be more active. So, I decided to return to Greece.

When I returned with my family to Athens we tried to stay again at the Skaramagas camp, but the camp manager did not accept us there. Eventually we found a smuggler but we did not have the money for the whole family to leave, so we paid only for my father and one of my sisters who have now arrived in Germany. Me and my other sister stayed in Athens. We met people from the occupation of City Plaza and now I am quite active in the squat.

In City Plaza, I can say that I finally found people who show solidarity and care for each other. I am talking about real solidarity. We also organize marches for all immigrants. If something happens to the Kurds or to Arabs, we will all protest, regardless of which country we come from. In other words, we are all fighting together. For example, we have organized a demonstration for tomorrow about the situation in Afghanistan, against the authoritarian government and all the people of City Plaza will march to the Afghan embassy. We also share all the work need to be done in the building. The cooking, the cleaning and the guarding. There is no good or bad job, we all share them together. The basic rules we all agreed on, is that we do not drink alcohol and that drugs are not allowed in the City Plaza, also that after midnight we do not talk loudly in the rooms because someone might be sick for example. We live together and we care for each other. In general, I can say that no problems or conflicts develop and this is achieved without effort, simply because we respect each other and not because it is imposed on us. This is especially interesting as there are people from many different countries. In City Plaza, I have made friends from everywhere.
I am Afghan but I grew up in Iran. In Iran as a child of refugees from Afghanistan I had no rights, my life was hell, I was treated as a stranger, even though I was born in Iran. I came with my family to Athens in the summer of 2016 and since 2017 I have been participating in the occupation of City Plaza while my family lives in the Skaramagas camp.

I would like to say the following about the way refugees are treated from my point of view. When I meet someone he/she always asks me where I come from. I do not like this question at all. I do not want to have a nationality, I do not want to belong to any country. For example, when I meet someone in a cafeteria and we have a good time, then at some point he or she will ask me where I am from. As soon as I answer that I am from Afghanistan then like when a button is pressed, his or her facial expression immediately changes and he or she tries to leave after an awkward moment. This is very traumatic, not to mention racist. So, I have decided that when I am asked where I am from, to answer that I have no nationality. It is this
feeling that nationality does not matter that makes me feel so beautiful in City Plaza. Here everyone is welcome regardless of religion, language and nationality. This is very important. Also, although obviously, everyone has a mother tongue, I speak Farsi and Dari for example, we have developed communicative codes because we live together that go beyond one’s mother tongue. Although English is certainly the common language that we are communicating, we try to learn from each other, for example I try to learn Arabic and Greek and teach Farsi and Dari to others. Eventually we have reached a point where languages are mixed and when we talk to each other we use words from different languages to communicate. Of course, above all, facial expressions and the way you talk to someone are important. In addition to these personal relationships developed, every Monday we meet for a general assembly in which we all participate and express our thoughts and take a position on the issues raised. There are also many celebrations, for example, tomorrow we have a Christmas party and yesterday we had an Iranian and Afghan celebration.

Also I want to say that I love very much Athens. When I’m out on the street it feels familiar. I do not feel like a stranger in this city. I feel like I was born here. I do not feel that I am a refugee here, I would say that 75% of the people in this city do not care if you are a refugee or not, they are open-minded. Also, people help each other. I was born and raised in another country but here I feel so comfortable for the first time, obviously, I faced many difficulties, but the best part of my life has been in Greece, in Athens. I will say something very simple, but very important for the way I feel. It is the first time in my life that I have a sim card in my name. This makes me feel very happy because finally my name is recognized, I also have a bank account in my name!

So, I really like living in Athens, although refugees have some problems with the government who do not provide us with houses in the city. Life in the State-run camps is very boring, doing the same things every day, you sleep, you wake up and nothing changes, you see the same people. Six months have passed, nothing changed. Every day is exactly the same. The camp is very far away and in fact the UNHCR and the various NGOs do not want to help. They say they work for the refugees but in reality, they do not work for us, I think they work like a mafia, they use the refugees, they use our names and our photos to make money. I went
to UNHCR many times to ask them for a normal house because I had lived in the camp for three years and I felt that was enough, I did not want to live in the camp anymore. I want to study, I want to work, I want to live in the city, I could no longer live in the camp and they did not answer me. I finally found this refugee squat and gave me dignity. Here I can learn English and Greek. Here I feel that I can communicate and that people care about me. We are happy here at City Plaza because we feel for each other, we work together and no NGOs or other organizations are involved here. The reason is very simple. People here do not want NGOs because they know that they do not work for refugees, they just use them. That’s why I like this squat. In fact, many times I discuss my experience of the City Plaza with the refugees at the Skaramaga camp and many ask me if there is a room available here to leave the camp. Everyone wants to leave the camp but there is no way they can survive. They see me every time I visit Skaramaga and they see my change, that I evolve and that I do not stand still and they also see how happy I am when I leave Skaramaga to come to City Plaza. They keep asking me if there will be a party, a celebration at City Plaza, so they can come. I receive so many messages of despair, anxiety and desire to come to the City Plaza. For example, a message saying that, “I am very upset and bored at the camp can we meet to go to City Plaza”.
I am from Syria and I live at the refugees’ squat of City Plaza. Here, there is no private property, everything belongs to everyone, it is a collective house. In a state-run camp or in a typical apartment, you are the owner of the container or the apartment, while here it is different. However, the main difference between life in a camp or in an apartment and life in the squat is that here, in City Plaza, there is communication. To put it another way, in an apartment you can have everything and is yours, but for how long can you be alone. If you do not have someone to talk to, tease, play and dance with, do something creative together to have fun, the house objects or the walls themselves do not matter. What is the point of sitting alone in your own apartment and smoking or drinking coffee on your own? What is the point? Also, an NGO might give me a house but they will soon take it back from me. If I am alone, there is nothing I can do. While here at City Plaza we are all together, united, we fight, we do not let the space to be taken from us, therefore we are not weak. If you are alone in an apartment, you are isolated, you are weak. That’s why
I like it here at City Plaza, because we fight together. And not only that, if I am sick someone will take care of me here in City Plaza, while in an apartment I will be alone. There is care and love here, people care if you need a lawyer, if you need a doctor and most of all, the look of love really is in their eyes. The walls of your home will never look at you this way. Here at City Plaza I found a lawyer who was really interested in my case, and not just in me, as he also went to Germany to help my sister. If I have only lived in the camp I would never have met these people, the people I met here. I have learned so many things here that it is unthinkable for the people in the camps or in the NGOs’ apartments.

Usually there is no one to explain to the refugees in the camps exactly how to talk to the asylum services. But here, in City Plaza, the refugee escorts have an active role and that is very different. Also, they do not do this out of a sense of simple charity but because we know each other and fight together. This is very different from the job of an NGO employee. I do not feel alone here, but I feel that I belong to a community of people who fight together. I feel like we are part of a big family, we are all brothers and sisters no matter where we come from and which language we speak. And we are not brothers and sisters like a typical family, here we are comrades. But not solely in the narrow sense of the political, we are comrades and friends together. A friend of mine cried for me, and the way he cares about me, he also cares about other people. A while ago I was not feeling very well, I felt and looked upset. So, an older refugee asked me why I looked like that and why my face had changed, and whether I would like to go and have a coffee to tell him my problem. Then how is it possible to want to leave this place? It is important in life to have people who care about you because they are your friends and not because they are working for a company. This is what I have felt in Athens, this is what I have felt in this squat.

Possibly the Greek residents of the apartment of the building next door are not like that, they just go to work every day, go home, watch TV and sleep. Here, at City Plaza we may be lucky to have this experience, it makes sense to live here. But for example, a few months ago we had a very unpleasant event in Athens, the big fire, a fire outside Athens in Mati. So, the refugees formed a group and gathered clothes here in the City Plaza and went to help the people in Mati who were very
happy to see us. When a Greek asked me why I was there I answered that 3 years ago when I was in the port I saw with my own eyes so many Greeks coming to help us and to give us clothes, shoes and food, fruits and even money. Some Doctors came to provide care to the refugees voluntarily. In other words, I saw people like him who came to help us, now it is my turn to reciprocate that help. My turn to help you as much as I can. These things have happened; how can I leave this city. What I want to say is that here in Athens I have made real friends for the first time in my life. Up to this point, I only had my family and had not felt good friends with other people. I felt this here in Athens.

In conclusion, I want to say three things that I have learned and that have impressed me the most here at City Plaza. The first thing is that I felt like a human being here, the second is freedom, here I feel free, the third is that nationality and religion do not matter. I experienced for the first time what it means for people to be all together like a family, regardless of nationality and religion and without the borders set by states and religions. But of course, we achieve this with a constant struggle. No one fights alone, but all together.
I am from Syria and I arrived in Belgrade in the spring of 2016. I stayed at a camp where the employees of the Serbian Refugee Service, who were supposed to help the refugees, did absolutely nothing. Instead, they cursed us, shouted at us, even beat us, especially when we were waiting in line for food, which was just a slice of bread and a small piece of fish, usually tuna. Also at the camp the policemen treated us like dogs and forced us to sleep 15 people in a small room. No sense of privacy. I’m referring to the camp which is close to the city of Belgrade. This is an old factory. So we felt like prisoners, every night at 22.00 the door of the factory was locked and police opened it again in the morning, then they gave us a plate of food and they locked the door again at night. It was like a prison, a normal prison. The door was locked at night and half of the day we were free. It’s like we were actually slaves in the camp. That’s why I couldn’t bear staying in the camp and left. Also, there was a very bad connection to the city, there was only one bus during the day which left the camp in the morning and returned in the afternoon. The camp was in
the middle of nowhere, 40-50 minutes by bus to the city center and we had to pay also for the ticket, but we had no money and the Serbian state did not provide any. Obviously, Serbia is a poor country but we, the refugees, have also lost everything. Also, volunteers and solidarity people were not allowed to enter the camp. That means that we did not have access to information and news from the outside world and we had no one to share our anxieties, to tell our problems and how we feel.

I want to be very clear here, refugees do not want just a plate of food or open borders. The refugees want someone to listen to them. They left their homelands because war and bombs have brought absolute silence. So, we came here to hear our voices, through a journey full of endless silent suffering. After Serbia, some of us arrived in Hungary, where the policemen also waited for us to silence our voice, beat us and sent us back badly injured, illegally deport us to Serbia. They regularly used dogs, who barked at us and bit us. Many refugees obtained bite injuries that will accompany them forever, as these dogs’ bites broke the skin. So, I see our silence in direct contrast to dog growls. We all hear them even now in our heads. I hear them especially in the night when I have nightmares with these dogs while sleeping.

At the camp, when a refugee did not return at night then he was not accepted again. In other words, they wanted us to feel like prisoners, to stay at the camp and not to go to the city. They used as an excuse that if we did not return to the camp at night, it meant that we were trying to leave Serbia. So every night, there was a police check asking for our documents, recording our names, checking who was there and who was missing and those who were missing were automatically thrown out of the accommodation system. Obviously, the refugees did not arrive in Serbia to stay at the camp, we were all trying to find a better solution and of course to leave the country.

But this was extremely difficult because the borders were closed. So, those who did not return to the camp, even for one night, were automatically homeless. The only option was to sleep at a park in Belgrade. There were 2 parks in the center of Belgrade where refugees gathered and slept. But the police came and beat us and forced us out of the park and told us to go back to the camps. There was also demonstrations sometimes organized by nationalists against the refugees who were
sleeping at the parks. These demonstrations used the pretext of hygiene and cleanliness, but were in fact nationalist and fascist. So, the police under the pressure of the nationalists decided to put fences around the park so that the refugees could not sleep there, they did not even allow us to sit on the grass. We called it the “Afghani park”. The police came every night and when someone passed through or cut the fence, the police immediately intervened and beat him and arrested him. At first the police used to come at 1.00 or 2.00 in the morning but then, police cars were parked all day and night outside of the park, even army vans sometimes. So, some people started looking for abandoned houses to stay. We wandered a lot through parks and abandoned houses. I know almost every abandoned building in Belgrade. But it was very difficult, because the neighbors usually called the police and threw us out again. I have slept many nights under the bridges of the river Sava, in cold and humidity. But this was not a solution. So, we finally used the old train station behind the bus station as it was next to the city center and we could access the market. It was also next to the bus station so the newcomers had the option to come to the refugee squat. In a way, we felt part of the city and at the same time we created our own space.
The occupation of the old train barracks was an abandoned area with a long building, where the trains were parked several years ago. There are still railway tracks on the ground. We used to call the building the “long house” precisely because of its shape and size, but I would also say somewhat figuratively. The journey of refugees looks like a big long house, however not in the typical sense of the house with walls and doors. On the contrary, walls are everywhere erected and we find closed doors. So, we wanted to talk about this feeling of long and narrow, narrow not solely in terms of the endless material and policed borders but also regarding a narrow mentality. So, we are talking about a long and narrow journey.

This building was of course very dirty inside, full of rubble and in a very poor condition, it has not been in use probably for the last 10 years. There was no electricity, there was no running water and we used the other abandoned warehouses of the former railway station for toilet. So we cleaned the building with the help of some solidarity people and activists. We also built a small kitchen and made a well
about 200 meters further.

During the winter, we took wood from the railroad tracks and burned it to keep warm inside the building. But, from the smoke and the smell of tar or the oils that these wood had on it, many people got sick, because it was obviously very unhealthy. However, we had no other option to keep warm, we had no blankets, no jackets, no shoes. No one bathed for many months. Some people took a bath by filling some barrels with hot water, but then they got sick from being out in the cold and the snow. The group No Border Kitchen also came and cooked there. Of course, the contribution of some residents of Belgrade, who brought bags of food and clothes to us, was also very helpful. In fact, when the building was evacuated, I remember that there were people from Belgrade, Serbs who cried because they had become friends with the refugees. On the other hand, there were also some racists and fascists who were against us. Several times immigrants were beaten by fascists in the street and came injured to the long house.

In general, I can say that compared to what we had lived until then, the long house was the best experience. We lived the most calm and friendly days there. Of course, I must note that most of the inhabitants of the long house were men. There were no women nor families. I want to emphasize this, because there was a lot of oppression in surviving this way in Belgrade and under these difficult conditions. Sometimes some people were arguing and the police were also watching us and it was very scary many times when they came at night with flashlights. So, it was not a safe place for women or children. We had lost all hope and this led people often to break down. We were a diverse group, many people were from Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Africa, and 10% of the people were from Syria, like me. But there was a sense of community, we stuck together through the good and the bad. We had developed a sense of intimacy and togetherness, belonging and trust. We spent so many months together in very difficult conditions, so, we became friends, we gave each other advices and a sense of trust developed between us. We were trying to imagine and organize our next steps, how to cross the borders, maybe one could say that we were conspiring together, we had our own secrets and we developed our own communication codes, how we would react if the cops caught us, etc. Also, we held meetings, we exchanged information, we shared ideas, we thought of possible
alternatives. In the long house, there was a strong sense of solidarity between us, otherwise we could not survive. We also made the decisions together. Nobody gave us orders, there were no leaders, we all co-decided what we wanted to do. Until, one day the police came again and told us that we should all move to the State-run camps. We said no, we do not want to leave, we do not want to return to camps, and we organized protests, shouted and resisted.

Eventually the police accepted that we would not leave and let us stay in the long house, but forbade all solidarity organizations to access the camp. Solidarity organizations had significantly contributed to the viability of the project, they had built the info park, an info center, where daily lists were made with the needs of the refugees and food, clothes, shoes and much more were distributed. But the police banned it. Some organizations, such as the No Border Kitchen, continued to cook but they could only offer one meal a day, a plate of soup. As winter approached the situation was becoming more and more difficult, it was cold and people did not have even shoes to wear. Because, as I explained, the residents of the long house were mostly people who had left the State-run camps and tried to cross Serbia’s borders with Hungary, but there the cops arrested them and took all their belongings, money, mobile phone, clothes and then deported them back to Serbia. So, those who lived in the long house were people in distress and mostly without money and without belongings.

After a few months, the government finally decided to evacuate the “long house” in order to proceed with the pharaonic project the so-called “Belgrade Waterfront project”. There was a lot of discussion about this project, many journalists wrote about it in the newspapers every day, it was the main topic of discussion in Belgrade. Then one day the police came and put us in buses and took us to camps, but to different camps in different cities. The goal was to separate us, because we felt like a community, like a family, we had created bonds between us and the police wanted to destroy this, to weaken us. So, they separated us by dividing us into distinct camps so that we lose this sense of community that we had built in the long house.
I am from Pakistan, but after completing an architecture degree I left because I felt very socially oppressed. I arrived in Belgrade in October 2016 and stayed until May 2017. In the beginning, I stayed in the old train barracks occupation next to the train station. Then, I was quite lucky because I met someone I knew from Lesvos island in Greece. I had stayed in Lesvos for a long time and I knew some solidarity people. So, when I arrived in Belgrade I met again some of those who had set up some self-organized structures and took me with them and stayed in their apartments in the city. It was a very interesting experience and so I decided to stay a little longer in Belgrade and not to continue my journey to northern Europe. There were also constant news about the mistreatment of migrants in other countries, such as Hungary, about the extreme violence migrants received and the way they were sent back to Serbia. So, I was quite scared to continue while I also felt that in Belgrade I was useful. My participation in the self-organized groups of support and solidarity with immigrants made sense to me.
So, at first Belgrade seemed like a very hospitable city, I liked to walk in the center, people did not treat me badly, even the police were not conducting immigration checks often. However, after the eviction of the barracks, in April 2017, the situation changed and the police started chasing the immigrants. So, then, I decided to leave Belgrade and after three attempts and big payments to smugglers, I managed to cross the borders to Hungary.

But let me start from the beginning. When I arrived in Serbia, I was not registered in Belgrade, that is, I was without papers, illegal and therefore I did not stay in State-run camps. In that time in Belgrade there were a lot of refugees who slept outside, in parks, on benches, on the grass. There were already 3,000 people who had found shelter and slept in the barracks, in the abandoned warehouses of the old railway station. The situation was very difficult because many refugees were trapped and were forced to spend the winter in Belgrade as the borders were closed. But the winter was extremely heavy, with snowfall and cold weather. I have never seen so much snow and cold in my life. In the beginning, as I said, I also stayed in the barracks and the only thing I was thinking was how to feed myself. There were some NGOs and some local organizations that helped refugees, offered tea and distributed meals. People were also trying to cook on their own, some kitchens were built. So, at first I wanted to leave as it was all very difficult.

Here, I would like to notice that when I was in Greece I considered that Serbia would be an easy country to quickly cross and move further North. In the end, however, things turned out differently. On the one hand, when I arrived in Belgrade I felt exhausted with no energy and I was afraid to take the risk to cross the borders. When I decided not to continue I run into some friends I had met in Greece in Lesvos, who participated in the No Border Kitchen and I helped them in the kitchen. These people had come to Belgrade with a self-organized team from Germany and had set up a tea facility in the park outside the train station. This is where I met them and they invited me to stay with them in the city. I also met some Serbian activists involved with the No Border Serbia initiative and I participated in the activities of these groups. This way I became more aware of the situation regarding European migration policies and the need to fight against them. Somehow, I became politicized during my participation in these groups. Of course, I had no money to pay the
smugglers, but I also realized the interconnection between the European policies and the system of smugglers. When the borders are sealed, the smugglers ask more money to take you across the border. That means, that when European countries decided to close their borders, smuggling profit increased. So, I decided to stay in Belgrade and work with people who struggled, European activists, Serb citizens and refugees. On the one hand, I was one of the thousands excluded by Europe and on the other hand I met different people and listened every day different stories by people, how much we all suffered and got to know each one’s different culture and backgrounds. So, I decided that I really needed to learn how to struggle in common with other refugees and solidarity people.

Here I would like to highlight something. In this trip to Europe every refugee first cares about his personal safety. Everyone is scared at first, no one is born a hero who can easily overcome all these difficulties. No, we are human beings and we have insecurities, especially because we are without papers in a foreign country. So, the first and foremost thing that refugees need is a sense of security. If this is achieved as it happened to me, I could then care for and help others. The second very important thing is to try to understand and listen to others, firstly the local community in which we find ourselves and of course the people, the refugees, that we meet on our way. I was very happy to realize this. I mean, I realized that I wanted to learn about Serbian culture because I lived there. It is extremely important to educate ourselves, to be open to difference and to learn from other people. Also, when ‘the doors are shut’ and you wait for the borders to open, then it is a good opportunity to focus into the area you are and possibly discover much more interesting open doors beyond the States’ borders. So, that was the moment when I learned in my life what humanism means, to care for the others. I came in touch also with very interesting people and I read about leftist and anarchist ideas. I had no idea about them before. I come from a country where everyone just works, cares about money and has children, that is all. There are no other possibilities and expectations. So, in Belgrade I discovered that there are people who think differently and who got me excited and fascinated me a lot and I feel very happy to be part of their teams. So, I decided to stay in this city for about half a year and it was probably the most creative, reflective and self-conscious period of my life.
I am from Afghanistan and when I arrived in Belgrade I used to walk a lot in the center of Belgrade and I can say that I encountered two types of behaviors. On the one hand, some people, not many, looked at us, the refugees, in disgust. In Serbia before 2015 there was not much experience of immigrants apart the one linked to the wars following the break-up of Yugoslavia. So, it’s a society not used to seeing people from Middle East, Asia or Africa. Yet, precisely because they understand what it means to lose your home, uproot and emigrate, most of the people welcomed us in a friendly way. I remember especially when I crossed the borders and entered Serbia, that in the villages and small towns the people were extremely friendly towards us. They offered us food, water, clothes and wished us good luck, maybe because our suffering reminded them of their own experiences. However, the situation changed, especially in Belgrade, and some people started looking at us with suspicion. Of course, when many people are forced to live in miserable conditions, without money for a long time and in a foreign city, then some will
be looking to snatch something from the life of the city and this can be done in an illegal way. So, certainly the situation in the old train barracks was not easy at all and delinquency was also part of everyday life. When you are in this situation you might do things which are not allowed. You can get drunk one night, you can make a fuss, you can even steal something. As a consequence, people of Belgrade began to dislike the refugees and they didn’t want a makeshift camp in the city center. Therefore, people gradually started to press the authorities to take the refugees out of the barracks and close them in the State-run camps. Also, the media certainly played an important role by using negative propaganda and magnifying the negative events. Even the international media that used to portray Belgrade as a vibrant and beautiful city, but also the alternative media that used to talk about Belgrade as the city of alternative youth culture full of graffiti and bars, showed images of the barracks and discouraged tourists from visiting Belgrade. Finally, during the 2017 election year, candidates promised to remove the immigrants from the city, and make the city attractive to tourists again. There was a repetitive rhetoric on how the refugees pollute the city, sleep wherever they want, pee in parks, beg and rob. So, the pressure to move the refugees from the barracks was increasing.

Besides that, I must emphasize that most of the supporters were activists who came to Belgrade from other countries, from Germany, Spain, the UK, etc. No Name Kitchen did a very good job as well as NGOs like MSF, Belgrade aid, UNHCR, which cooperated with the state. I do not personally like so much these organization because in reality they do not care much about the refugees, they just do their business, they care about the profit and of course this kind of job means working from 9.00 in the morning to 17.00 in the evening, and usually without caring what happens after the end of the shift. I’m not saying that people who work in these NGOs are bad people, I’m just saying that they are not interested in the real situation.

On the other hand, I would like to emphasize that solidarity groups such as the No Name Kitchen and local support groups had a different approach. They shared food and this is something very important. Food is definitely important for our reproduction but it is also something more than that, it is a social and ethical practice.
We try to make it delicious, we take care of the way we serve the food, the way we sit around the table and most of all, it is a medium of communication. Especially for those of us coming from countries in the Middle East, Asia and the Mediterranean, known for their food. So, what does food mean when you are on the move, when you are migrating, and how sharing food can bring you closer to other migrants. I believe that food performs two functions, the first is to provide our bodies with what they need to stay alive, and the second is the social function, is the way we feed our soul. So, we can say that NGOs care about the first function of food as an essential to life, and in fact the NGOs treat the refugees as bodies without a soul, without social relations, without a cultural background. The NGOs organize their meals in a specific way, we stand in a queue and just wait in line for a plate that is usually a plate of poorly cooked soup and of course as there is always a long wait, especially in the cold days of winter, there are many fights that break out between people. So, in this case the food is a cause of quarrels that separates people and not a means to include people in a group. Especially, when some refugees who are hungry wait for a second portion of food and the NGO workers forcibly remove them. Of course, we must not forget that NGOs aim at profit so they use the people they feed to advertise their actions. They are supposed to serve humanity but the way they do things causes the separation of people. NGOs do not care about talking and listening to refugees. Whereas when one tries to create a friendly environment of sharing food, then food acquires another meaning. All of us, refugees and solidarity people may not speak the same language, but we all share other senses, such as looks, facial expressions through which we can communicate. So, when a friendly and participatory environment is created then we can definitely feel better and get closer. The most important thing refugees need is not food but understanding.

In contrast to these experiences, it was remarkable how the refugees tried to support each other and help each other. Without a basis of left or anarchist ideology, they themselves created self-organized structures so that they are not dependent on the food of the NGOs. Those who had some money tried to buy food and share it with others, they all cooked together and shared the food in the barracks. In fact, we called the main building in the barracks as the “smoke barracks”, because it had so much smoke from cooking and from the fires that people put to keep warm.
Entering the building one could feel everywhere the smell of smoke. So, there were people who cared about each other. And this makes sense, because when I have the opportunity to cook, I do not want to eat alone, I always invite some friends to eat together. This is how mutual aid groups were created between people who then often decided to move together to the border and help each other, e.g. if someone got caught and sent back, the others would look for him and take care of him. Therefore, one could see and admire the small daily practices of mutual aid and sharing. The people who did not give up, who tried to be active. Mutual aid gave birth to a constant inventiveness, attempts to find ways to survive with nothing. The refugees in the barracks were in fact completely helpless, they were in a foreign country and yet they managed to survive for many months. So, these small acts of sharing and mutual solidarity formed the basis to build a strong community between the people who lived in the barracks, a community that organized many demonstrations, such as the demonstration to the border with Croatia, 200 km from Belgrade. I want to say also that the social process of forming the barracks as a community proves that everyone has his or her culture, skills and desires. All these cannot be understood by an outsider, by someone who listens to the media. The relationships and friendships that developed in the barracks, the way people shared their dreams and anxieties and talked about the past. Many of us believe that the friendships we made in the barracks were the strongest in our lives.
I am from Syria, and I have been living in Istanbul for the last few years. We have formed, with some other friends, a solidarity group for the homeless refugees in Syria. We have nothing to do with NGOs nor are we an officially organization. We are just friends and driven by feelings of dignity and solidarity we want to not forget how the Syrians live and what they go through in Syria. So, we try to collect things which can be useful such as clothes, shoes, blankets and send them to Syria. Especially in winter there is a great need for basic equipment due to the very cold climate of Syria. Some people bring us new clothes to send them to Syria. I am one of those who visited Syria in February to distribute aid. We want to show them that they are not forgotten. Although we live outside of Syria, we are refugees in Turkey and we constantly think about the people that suffer in Syria. So, we want to show them in practice that we think of them, that we have not forgotten them, that they are not alone, that they are not without support. Thus, we organized some meetings and then we spread the word to our friends and created a Facebook page. Our group
is called “We Are For Each Other” and we managed to spend some time in Syria, so we went to the camps around Aleppo and Idlib, to some informal camps and distributed the aid. About 3,000 people are homeless around Idlib. Now we are trying to find more people who would like to support this effort. Generally speaking, I have been trying all of my life to help people in need, when I was in Syria and now here in Istanbul. The “We Are For Each Other” campaign has been organized by some friends, some of whom we knew from Syria and others I met here in Istanbul.

I was studying law in Syria but because of the war I was forced to leave and I have been here in Istanbul since 2014. At first I only worked, I could not study, I had to raise some money. I also worked 12 hours per day, a very hard work with a very low salary. For a long period I was working 16 and 17 hours per day without being paid extra money. Turkish employers are taking advantage of our situation as refugees and they constantly cut our wages. I have worked in restaurants, in cafes, in tourist shops, everywhere the same situation. It is clear that employers and the Turkish economy are benefiting from the millions of poor refugees. In fact, we are not recognized as refugees, no one calls us refugees like in Europe, we are called “guests” and we are treated as “guests”. There is no law that gives us a refugee status and rights that recognized refugees have in Europe, especially labor rights. Those of us who are “guests” have absolutely no rights, the employers do what they want. All refugees are working 12 hours per day for a salary of $ 10 per day, and that is, for relatively good jobs. I work in a restaurant and it does not matter if I have degrees or if I am educated, all refugees, regardless of their educational level, work in jobs that make them feel like a machine, the employers give you orders, do this, do that, and you keep repeating the same movements, you are like a robot, like a machine whether you work in restaurants, or in textiles, or in the bakery, you are just like a machine for the boss, nothing else. Of course, there are some very rich Syrians who live in the center of the city in luxury apartments, but the majority who are extremely poor live outside the city; Zeytinburnu, Okmeidani, Esenyort are some of the most common areas where refugees live. The neighborhood of Tarmabasi is also a very well-known area in the center of the city where many refugees live and some solidarity groups are based.

In 2017 I started studying at the Law school of Istanbul University. So now I am
working and studying at the same time, I go to university from 9.00 in the morning until 13.00 and then I work until midnight. My daily timetable and my life are very difficult.

However, I would also like to say that this is the first time that I feel somewhat freer to express my views. In Syria, there is censorship and fear everywhere, there is no freedom of speech. Here I would say that it is somewhat easier for someone to express himself. In Syria, you can be in prison at any time without even knowing the reason. If you express your views freely you end up in prison. Rumors spread about you, can put you in jail. The police can come and arrest you for no reason at all. There is no justice. Even if you ask why someone, like a friend of yours, is in jail, then the police will also arrest you and put you in jail. In other words, it is a regime of fear. No justice, no freedom, no law, no life, no peace. Here I feel more comfortable, more free, although from what I see, racism against the Syrians is now slowly beginning to develop. In the beginning when we arrived, I would say that there was no racism, the Turks welcomed us very nicely, and they were very hospitable, but now things are changing. In my daily life, I do not face any kind of racism, that is, there is no direct form of racism, but is more obvious on social media, for example on Facebook many have started writing things such as, ‘why refugees do not go back to their country’.

I am in contact with other refugees from Palestine, Iraq, Egypt and Yemen because we all speak the same language, Arabic. In a way, Arabic is the language of refugees, it is spoken by people from Iraq, Syria, Yemen and the Maghreb countries. This brings us, the refugees, closer, we can communicate and get to know each other more easily. I have also learned to speak Turkish so I can now communicate with the Turks. If you want to stay in Turkey, you must learn to speak Turkish.

Meanwhile, Istanbul is a very beautiful city, but it is difficult to live here. The work is very difficult and the city is very expensive. As I said, I study in the morning and work all day and night, so I do not have time to go out, to see the real Istanbul. It’s definitely nice to live in Istanbul, but I don’t have time to enjoy it.
I am from Aleppo, and I have been in Istanbul for the last five and a half years. I feel Istanbul as my second home, in fact it is now my new home. I live in Tarlabasi on a street where the local open market takes place every Sunday, a very intense event with many people shouting, selling, buying, bargaining. I live in an apartment in an old building with 7 more people. The apartment has two rooms and a small living room and we pay 900 Turkish pounds (140 euros), excluding utilities, electricity and water costs. This is a very good opportunity, compared to the basic salary in Turkey, about 2500 pounds. However, the rents in Tarlabasi are constantly rising as many people from the Gulf countries, China and Russia, and of course very rich Turks, come to buy property. Tarlabasi is the new Eldorado of Istanbul. It is like a kind of a new colonialism. Also, Airbnb has been doing a lot of damage in Tarlabasi during the last years, and dozens of rental homes available in the area appear on the Airbnb platform. At the moment, a room in Tarlabasi in the Airbnb platform costs 20 to 25 euros but in a few years the prices will increase a lot.
I will leave Turkey in a short time because I got a visa for Sweden and I can say that I will miss the city because it is really beautiful, but because I will also miss my friends and my family. I will miss Tarlabasi, my neighborhood, because for me, it is a very sweet and human neighborhood in the city. For the last 2-3 years, I have been living in Tarlabasi, and before with my family outside of the city. Tarlabasi is changing very fast, it is gentrified. In my house, I have a window overlooking the neighborhood, the poor houses of poor people. But unfortunately, this was hidden from view by a big hotel which is being built for two months now. It’s very annoying. So, I think I am leaving at the right moment, in a little while the Tarlabasi we know will disappear, it will be full of hotels and luxury apartments. It is already happening. For most Turks, this is an unknown area, they know almost nothing about Tarlabasi, as mainly immigrants live here. In the past, Greeks and then Kurds and Roma lived here, whereas now mostly people from Africa and the Middle East. Tarlabasi is a very lively neighborhood, full of memories. You see children playing everywhere, in all the narrow streets. There are no squares, nor a free green space and so small children run laughing and playing in all the small alleys. Washing hangs from clothes line between houses and women wash their carpets on the street. Even at night the area remains so lively. Especially before the Ramadan period, weddings take place every day and parties are held everywhere at night. Sometimes I could not sleep at night because of the street gatherings and the music. In contrast, the state and the media constantly talk about Tarlabasi in a very negative way, as an area of criminal activity. Personally, I have never felt threaten in Tarlabasi, I never had any problems, no one has attacked me and our house has never been robbed, while robberies are frequent in other neighborhoods. Okay, there are people who sell drugs in the alleys towards Tarlabasi Avenue, but if you do not bother them they do not bother you. There may be other vibrant and colorful neighborhoods like Tarlabasi, but Tarlabasi is in the center of the city and is inhabited by many nationalities and this gives it that extra character. I would say that people might not feel so free in other neighborhoods, that is, poor neighborhoods are usually more conservative, and the inhabitants are more religious and not very tolerant towards other people. I also remember the first time Syrians came to Tarlabasi, everyone was trying to help us, whether they were immigrants from
other countries or Kurds who used to live in the area. They gave us food, clothes, and our children played together. If one observes the micro-community between children one can learn a lot about the way people can communicate across borders and nationalities.

In the area there are also some solidarity to migrants social centers, like the Tarlabası Community Center, Ad.dar and Mutfak. In Mutfak especially, very interesting activities have been organized in the last 4 years, like collective kitchens for all residents and especially immigrants, language lessons, activities for children and a lot of people from different countries have come to help. Of course, there is always the problem of stability. To create stable and in-depth relationships, people must stay permanently in an area, but in Tarlabasi many immigrants stay only temporarily as they search for ways to leave, it is just a stop on their journey.

Also, another neighborhood of particular interest with many immigrants is Koumkapi, and is where the State immigration department is. So, in front of the building there are always refugees waiting for their papers. For example, I went to Koumkapi 2 days ago to get permission to leave Turkey. There were about 3,000 people in front of the building at the time. Obviously not all of them live in Koumkapi, but also the area has old factories, warehouses and shops selling clothes and shoes, and thus, maybe they work in these shops and warehouses.

Immigrants and Syrians live generally everywhere, they are not confined to one area, they are not confined to some kind of ghetto. They are everywhere in the city and that’s good.

As for the refugees, I would say that they are very different in the way they try to survive in Istanbul. For example, many will turn to relatives and friends for help, family relations is a very important element in the life of the Syrians. Others may try in more political ways to claim their rights, this is the case for mainly Kurds and Palestinians. Of course, Kurdish political organizations are banned and this is an additional risk for a refugee, but many choose to act this way. Finally, religious communities and organizations provide a foothold to many Arabs since Islam is the dominant religion in Turkey.
I am 20 years old and I am from Syria, from Homs, but we moved with my family to Damascus. Two years ago I decided to leave from Syria because I was living in a war zone and I wanted to escape from this miserable war situation. I did not want to kill and I did not want to be killed. I came to Turkey alone and my parents are still there.

When I arrived here I noticed many differences, the culture is different, the way people think is different. I have learned a lot from this new life and the new things I have seen. For example, I often see boys and girls together, people drink alcohol and smoke freely, people also eat during the day during Ramadan period, no one judges you for what you do. You cannot do such things in Syria. Here people are much more liberal than in Syria, there is freedom of speech, people accept you, they are open to diversity. I do not find much resemblance to Syria or at least to the neighborhood in Damascus where I lived. I really like it here because Istanbul is an extremely beautiful city, but because also people here are much more open and
friendly to refugees, unlike other countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Iran. But also in Syria, I was forced to move from place to place and there were big problems everywhere, so here in Istanbul is the first time I feel safe and calm.

Here in Istanbul I stayed for a while in the Fatih area and then I moved to Tarlabasi. There are many Syrians living in Fatih, it is an area full of shops with Arabic signs and you get the feeling that you are in Syria. But sometimes, tensions with the locals can be quite intense, and sadly, the Turkish residents blame the new inhabitants, the Syrians. Another reason I decided to leave the Fatih area is that I couldn’t stand the conservative culture of the people there and that I had not found a house I liked. But why did the Syrians choose Fatih? First, Syrians will go where other Syrians are and follow in their footsteps, preferring cultural and language proximity for reasons of security. Also, many people already knew Fatih area from Syria and thus when new refugees come from Syria they will definitely go through Fatih as there are many Syrian shops, restaurants, barbershops, clothes shops. So Fatih attracts the Syrians.

Now I live in Tarlabasi in a more comfortable house and I like it much more here, I have my own room and I can bring my friends whenever I want. Also an important difference with Fatih is that there are not so many Syrians here, the area is not dominated by Syrians like Fatih. Therefore, I do not feel the social pressure I felt in Fatih. In Tarlabasi I feel freer, I prefer it. We are 7 people living in the house, sometimes it is annoying to live together with so many people in the house, but in general I have my room and I can spend a lot of time alone, there is no need to constantly socialize with the others. My friends live in Fatih but I also have new friends in Tarlabasi.

Tarlabasi is generally considered a dangerous area, a crime-ridden neighborhood, but I think these are rumors as I never had a problem, no one has bothered me. Tarlabasi is a very poor and friendly neighborhood, it reminds me of the atmosphere and social life of neighborhoods in Syria. I mean, in Tarlabasi, like many neighborhoods in Syria, people care about each other, there are caring networks. If someone has a problem, the neighbors will take care of him or her and help or protect him or her. Also, the children play together and many times you see women cooking together or washing the carpets and rugs all together on the street. If there
is a problem, you see mostly men coming together and trying to solve it. Also, if a neighbor is very poor and has no money for food, the neighbors bring him food, something I do not think happens in neighborhoods where only Turks live. Also in Tarlabasi, people of various nationalities and from many countries around the world, live. Sometimes there are problems between the locals and the newcomers, many times the locals make fun of the foreigners in both the Fatih and the Tarlabasi areas. I like living with people from different cultures, I first had such an experience in Syria, in Idlib, where many refugees from other Asian countries lived. Now, I really like living in such a multicultural neighborhood like Tarlabasi.

I would say that Tarlabasi is a very good case of a neighborhood for refugees, cause it is right in the center of the city but it keeps the elements of a neighborhood. People smile at you on the street, the neighbors know each other. Apart from Syrians, there are also many Kurds, other Arabs from Palestine, Iraq and Egypt, as well as many from Africa, they are all extremely nice, I never had a problem with them. We are all humans, with our own problems and dreams, with a different culture, but we are all equal, we are all humans. Maybe for a tourist the word Tarlabasi means fear, but for me it means home, neighborhood, friends.
I am from Syria and I live now in Tarlabasi. In the beginning, when I arrived in Istanbul, I had arranged to meet with someone who was supposed to find me a job and a house. But he never showed up, he did not answer my phone calls and so I went homeless for few nights and then I was sleeping at a cousin’s house. In Istanbul, you can see homeless refugees in parks and squares, but no one stays homeless for a long period. There are many jobs, poorly paid of course, but you can find something when you are in despair. However, there are cases in which the bosses do not pay the refugees for their work and I know a family for example, that did not have money to pay the rent and after 3 months the landlord threw them out and they were left homeless, but they received help from some other people in Tarlabasi who hosted them in their houses.

I have worked in a printing house, a patisserie and many other occasional jobs, but in general I try to improve myself and I go to school in the last year and would also like to continue to the university. Due to the war in Syria I stopped going to
school for two years and continued again here in Istanbul. Now, I like studying and I would like to go to the university.

I have not thought about going to Europe but I would say that my family probably does not want me to go that far. They basically fear that I might change. My family is quite conservative and they think that if I go to Europe I will lose my cultural identity. They believe that here in Istanbul, I am still close to the Syrian way of life. Also, because they have helped me a lot financially, I do not want to upset them, I feel I must reciprocate. But it is interesting that my parents prefer for me to live here in Istanbul as they consider Turkey an Islamic country. In fact, they have never visited Istanbul and they do not know what the reality is. I really like that Istanbul is not such a strongly Islamic city, which is why I left Syria. My parents think that all of Turkey is the same, the East part of Turkey is obviously much more conservative, but Istanbul has everything. My parents will come for the first time in Turkey, to Gaziantep, in July and they will see what life is like in Turkey. Of course, here in Istanbul things are very different, there are so many different people and so many different mentalities. For example, it is not unlikely for a Syrian, like me, to get into relation with a Turkish girl, and this is something unbelievable, I could not even dream of this in Syria. I expected that they will look at me with contempt, but there are so many different people in Istanbul.

Sometimes I had problems with the police because of my papers, the so-called kimlik is registered in another city and the last time the police checked me they told me that if they catch me again in Istanbul they will arrest me. They stopped me at a metro station and were searching my body for tattoos and asking me if I was Kurdish, but they finally let me go. But another time, I was arrested and taken to the police station. The reason was that we were with some of my classmates outside the school and some of them threw fireworks, but in front of the school is the police station and so policemen came and picked us all up. But because the students were under 18, policemen finally let us all go after a few hours. My main problem is that my papers show that I am registered in another city, not in Istanbul, so it is not very easy for me to move around and I am trying all the time to avoid the police. So, because my papers say that I live elsewhere I cannot get a student discount card for the bus to school. The school is in Bayrampasa, far away from where I live, and it
takes me two hours every day to get there. The school belongs to the Turkish Ministry of Education, so it is a Turkish school but with a special integration program for the Syrians and we must give some additional exams if we want to continue to higher education. In general, although Syrians have access to education, we face many problems. For example, the classes for Syrians are not as well organized as those for the Turks. Also, there are very strict rules, boys and girls are not allowed to sit together and is forbidden to have earrings or piercings. It is inconceivable that they make us notice if boys and girls start talking between them. In Syria, although most are single sex schools, there are some private and some few public mixed schools. I think that it would have been better to put us in a class together with Turks and not to receive this special treatment.

Finally, I would like to say that Istanbul is a wonderful city which allows you to get out of your bubble, the social and personal way of thinking and living, and discover many nice and interesting things. For me, coming to Istanbul has been a very positive change. However, I must admit that as a person I do not have a strong will, I have definitely gone through a long period of adjustment, have endured many hardships and have gone through a very long period of loneliness without socializing, however now I think I have more willpower to do things. For example, for a long time I felt I missed my family, my parents and my friends, but now I try not to feel this feeling of loss and nostalgia but to focus on reality and move on with my life. I would like to make more friends, to feel that I belong to a community, so that I can share my problems and thoughts. Many times, I just put my headphones on, listen to music and walk the streets of the city, I really like that, but I would also like to share my thoughts.