

READING NEW URBAN PRACTICE IN SYRIAN NEIGHBOURHOODS IN ANKARA THROUGH FORCED MIGRATION¹

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1. Introduction

As the world is dealing with a Syrian refugee crisis, many countries have been faced with these changes in the urban environment. Especially in Turkey, this crisis has caused socio-spatial problems for both refugees and Turkish citizens. Turkey is one of the most preferred countries by Syrian refugees due to its geographical proximity and has been accepting Syrian refugees who have faced forced migration due to the ongoing war in Syria since 2011. The main reasons why asylum seekers prefer this country are spatial proximity, the existence of a common socio-cultural structure and the immigration policies implemented by the Turkish government (Harunoğulları and Cengiz, 2014). According to the statistics of Presidency of Migration Management of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Turkey dated April 2022, Syrian refugees under temporary protection constitute approximately 3.7 million of the total 4 million refugees and asylum seekers from other nationalities.

The capacity of refugee camps for Syrians under temporary protection who were forced to leave their country was not sufficient for the large number of refugees. For this reason, the number of refugees, who have the aim of accessing shelter and employment opportunities, in the cities has increased rapidly. Thus, a new phenomenon called "Urban Refugees", which tries to be integrated into cities socially, spatially, economically has emerged as a daily life practice. However, at this point, which has passed a decade of migration, the phenomenon of transience has lost its sustainability. While the

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urban environment has been affected by this social trend, there has been a need for more resilient, efficient and long-term effective incentives, alternatives, strategies and solutions for dynamic geographical crisis spaces to create a more socially comprehensive structure.

The aim of this study is to make a socio-spatial city reading through Önder and Ulubey Neighbourhoods of Altındağ Municipality, where Syrian refugees are concentrated in the city of Ankara. The neighbourhoods are located in the Altındağ district of Ankara, near the SiteLER industrial zone, which can be considered as a potential employment area for urban refugees.

The concept of the spatial triad developed by the French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre will be used in the examples of these neighbourhoods to analyse the daily spatial practices of Syrian urban refugees and their representations in the field, and to read their spatial production. In this article, a comprehensive literature review on spatial triad and forced migration was made. With field studies, the spatial production process in the daily lives of refugees was tried to be understood and empirical studies such as survey analysis, statistical evaluations, and quantification of qualitative data were carried out on Syrian urban refugees in the aforementioned neighbourhoods.

2. Forced Migration and the Concept of Urban Refugee

The concept of urban refugee began to be used in the 1960s and its policy was developed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the 1990s (Crisp, 2017). Over the last two decades, the issue of urban refugees has been gaining more importance on the global refugee policy agenda. There is a rapid urbanization process in the world and more than half of the world's population lives in cities, and in parallel, it is an inevitable fact that the majority of refugees in the world reside in urban areas. Together with the definition of UNHCR, the concept of urban refugee refers to all refugees living outside the camps. Urban refugees are among the most vulnerable groups in low-income countries. According to UNHCR, the urban refugee population worldwide is very diverse; particularly large numbers of women, children and the elderly with certain protection difficulties. Urban refugee populations face special protection needs related to their urban environment because they may be deprived of regular access to basic social services such as security, health, education, and they often face hostile attitudes in the countries where they refuge. Since 2017, UNHCR has prioritized urban refugees for resettlement compared to refugees living in refugee camps.

Forced migration can very simply be defined as forced displacement, meaning a migration movement in which there is an element of coercion, whether natural or anthropogenic, including threats to life and livelihoods (IOM Key Migration Terms, 2022). In many cases, migration brings with it vulnerability and eventually this becomes chronic due to refugees' limited access to basic resources due to socio-economic, cultural and political barriers and inequality of opportunity. In this context, language, legal and administrative barriers restrict these people's opportunities to access daily life opportunities and services such as health, education and employment.

In addition, since refugees do not know the local environment, their knowledge and awareness about local resources and how to use them is not sufficient. One of the most important problems faced by refugees today is discrimination, xenophobia and constant exposure to hate speech brought about by the lack of political representation. In the example of Turkey, especially the language barrier and the lack of skills for the urban workforce reduce the daily living standards of refugees to a very low level and become the most important reasons for the difficulties they face in accessing opportunities and meeting their basic needs.

Due to the current conditions and insufficient capacity of public services, problems arise in accessing these social services, especially health and education services, for Syrian refugees language barrier is one of the main reasons for these access problems. Skill shortages are also of undeniable importance for the urban labour market, and Syrian urban refugees often work in simple jobs that require cheap labour and physical effort. While men join the workforce mainly as unqualified workers, women generally either stay at home without working or they are observed as beggars in public spaces. Children are employed as unofficial recycling workers who collect waste in extremely bad conditions. On the other hand, unemployed low-income members of local communities are convinced that Syrian refugees are taking their jobs, creating hate speech and directly attributing the cause of the depreciation of the labour market to refugees.²

Under these conditions, the fact that local residents see refugees as the source of causes that increase crime and carry the effect of war to Turkey, and as groups who use public resources without doing anything, trigger social tensions and conflicts in local communities to a large extent. The importance

² This information was collected through interviews with local government units and field observations in Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods.

of all these aforementioned problems in daily urban and socio-spatial practices is so great that unexpected and large-scale changes have occurred in a very short time due to the changing social psychology and mutual incompatibility, and crisis geographies have occurred, especially in cities where Syrian refugees are concentrated.

3. Lefebvre's Spatial Triad Theory

Space is a social product and each individual plays a role in the production process of space. Henri Lefebvre emphasizes that space is thought of as a geometric formation in literature, whereas space is a living organism. People experience the city and its surroundings in their daily lives. Accordingly, Lefebvre aimed to contribute to the literature by defining a new way of spatial thinking, emphasizing that space is not only an empty space, but also a phenomenon that shapes human society and is shaped by human activities. The results of people's interactions and relationships between each other and space determine the (re)production of space. In addition to being affected by the place they live in; people also create their own spaces. Beyond the material structure of the space, human socio-cultural values, meanings or experiences play a role in the social production of social space. Space is a concept that can be experienced, conceived, perceived, designed and lived. For this reason, people visualize the results of experiencing their environment in the space they live in and create their symbols in those spaces.

Lefebvre developed a triple model to avoid objective/subjective, mental/material, natural/social duality, and suggested a third possibility for spatial discussions. According to him, primarily, social space is the morphologically or organically built environment and consists of *spatial practices* that connect a network of significantly materially grounded activities or interactions. Secondly, spatial practice constitutes the *representation of space* by being defined abstractly and concretely as a frame of reference or order for a spatial orientation. Third and lastly, the *representational space* consists of meanings and symbols that express the social norms, values or experiences of the space defined as abstract and concrete. All three dimensions of this trio work together like a trivet, and there is reciprocal, complementary and endless relationships between them. Each of them directly affects the existence of the others in the process of social production of social space.

Spatial practices emerge with the deciphering of the space with the life patterns developed by the society and social fabric in daily life, and in fact, the practices produce their own space. The daily routines of individuals shape the spatial practice, and spatial practices enable the space to be perceived and experienced at the level of daily life. Representations of space are created by urban actors, urbanists, architects, planners or artists in line with certain norms and codes. Representations of space, which have been conceptualized through design and fiction processes, are effective in the social sphere with the help of spatial practices. This planned space is a guide for the relations between the subject and the space, thus it has a critical role in the production process of the space. Representational spaces, on the other hand, express the part of the society that belongs to the unconscious, and although there are codes and norms in these spaces, they are not as readable as in the other two examples. Representational spaces can be defined as the spaces of each individual forming the society, not institutions. These spaces, which are actually passively experienced, cover the physical space to create the symbolic use of their objects. For this reason, representational spaces can turn to non-verbal symbol and sign systems.

4. Spatial Triad Production in the Context of Syrian Refugees

The main feature of the refugee movement is that it appeared suddenly and unexpectedly and the refugees did not have a settling plan. Therefore, the choice of place and settlement of the refugees took place spontaneously. Forced migration movement is not only a physical and spatial change, refugees aim to construct their own geography and realize it. In fact, along with the places, cultures and customs also migrate and shape the migrated places. In the process of defining social identities, the phenomenon of home plays a major role and this social structure constitutes the social production of the space. These variables in urban environments are indicators of the spatial triad and are based on Lefebvre's spatial triad and its interpretations. It includes perceived area, activity, destination and routes, and physical intervention variables.

Syrian refugees are not evenly distributed in urban environments. Because they are personally and socially vulnerable, they tend to concentrate in certain places to protect themselves. Position preferences are primarily motivated by levels of financial resources. Refugees with moderate financial resources or middle income tend to concentrate in settlements, where there are clusters of social, educational and medical services provided formally or informally by immigrants like themselves. The

largest group is Syrian refugees with very limited financial resources. They prefer residential areas with the lowest rents and mostly informal residences, and 2 or 3 families can live together in the places they rent. Due to the physical proximity of these low-cost residential areas to unregistered workplaces, where they can easily find daily work, there is a tendency for urban refugees to over-concentrate in these areas.³ This lifestyle of Syrian refugees has also increased the domestic density in certain parts of the cities and this is far beyond what was designed in the urban development plans. Changes in residential densities produce new patterns of space use, mainly in the form of commercial uses. Residential areas are also transforming into commercial units. Commercial units in these patterns are often informal, but are very useful among Syrian urban refugees as they provide products and services that Syrians demand between themselves. As a result, new and forced systems are developed that affect daily urban practice.

There is a high level of ethnic density in these urban environments, and as a result of the limited communication and relations of Syrian urban refugees with other social groups, it becomes increasingly difficult to talk about multiculturalism. However, in the urban fabric that defines a kind of ghettoization process, it is very possible to encounter symbolic borders and patchwork spaces that are difficult to manage with official planning strategies of socio-spatial separation.

With the arrival of refugees, the characteristics of neighbourhoods have inevitably changed. Önder and Ulubey Neighbourhoods are adjacent to each other, close to the Sitaler industrial zone, and because a part of the industrial zone is located within the borders of Önder district, living and working areas are intertwined. Önder Neighbourhood, where Syrian urban refugees reside in tenant status, has been an urban transformation area since July 2015. Ulubey Neighbourhood, which is evaluated within the scope of the urban transformation decision, is also in the demolition stage (Mazlumder, 2015). In this sense, these areas are among the renewed neighbourhoods and have gone through important legal, spatial and urban transformation processes. Regarding the urban transformation in the region, it is not known what is envisaged for the aforementioned neighbourhoods due to the blurred understanding of Turkey's urban transformation policy. Önder Neighbourhood was named "Little Aleppo" due to the growing Syrian population with the developing networks and the apparent dominance of Syrian culture in the region.⁴ What is visible is not only the spatial existence of refugees

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in urban public spaces, but also the problems produced by the gap between living practices and cultures.

4.1. Spatial Practice of Urban Refugees

When spatial plans, strategies or policies specific to urban refugees are missing, refugees can produce their own lifestyles. In this context, urban refugees have begun to organize their spatial practices in their daily lives and put them into a system. Syrians prefer to have minimal contact with other parts of the city for their daily social life, and rather to create a social network within themselves. In other words, Syrian urban refugees are included in the region both economically and socially and they change the concept of the city with their active participation. While neighbourhoods are self-sustaining among urban refugees and existing local residents, socio-spatial mechanisms can be said to be portrayed in a self-sustaining way with newcomers and existing locals. However, there is an integration problem between the newcomers or guests and the settled residents of the neighbourhoods.

Although the physical interventions of the Syrians in the neighbourhoods were not on a residential basis, they started to change the appearance of the streets and facades with the effect of the signboards. There are a lot of Syrian bazaars, and food and clothing shopping services in the markets in the neighbourhoods. It has been observed that there is a social and economic solidarity among refugees, especially in terms of commercial activities, and almost all owners of small tradesmen businesses, from food, clothing and service sectors to tailors and barbers, are Syrians. These examples clearly show that urban refugees have established a locally integrated economic structure by performing an economic spatial practice. However, problems such as working illegally in neighbourhoods and in many places, especially in the Sitaler industrial zone, or being a tax-free business owner, and the effects of this situation on Turkish neighbours, still have not reached an acceptable solution by all parties. The most common social and recreational activities of Syrian urban refugees are to meet with their friends and/or relatives and go to cafes, that reflect their own culture, and urban parks. Yet urban refugees do not prefer to be a part of cultural activities due to language and cultural barriers.

Another issue that greatly affects daily spatial practice is, of course, due to the global crisis experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic, Syrian urban refugees are among the groups that suffer the most, especially in economic and educational terms. The closure of many business centres resulted in Syrians trying to find ways to increase their income in order to survive and meet their daily needs, rather than taking into account health measures. In addition to economic concerns, urban refugees have been left helpless in the field of education due to the interruption of face-to-face education as a result of the pandemic. Syrian children, who are in a difficult situation due to the lack of technological equipment, which has become the most important tool for online education, are also deprived of special support mechanisms that take care of them. In addition to these, the most effective interpretation in terms of spatial practices in neighbourhoods is that the temporary situation of Syrian urban refugees has changed and the tendency to be permanent has become stronger due to the great limitations in mobility caused by the pandemic.

4.2. *Representations of Space of Urban Refugees*

Representations of space are important to reveal the spatial textures and the effects of the knowledge and ideology of the authorities that reflect the space. When planners, local authorities and decision makers do not intervene in the space in an analytical, integrative and conciliatory way, the actors of the space become users and the users produce their own spaces. Accordingly, urban refugees, as users or new residents, create new spaces for their cultural and social characteristics. Space is produced by them and neighbourhoods can turn into isolated neighbourhoods used only by refugees. This situation is directly related to the problem of social integration. Önder and Ulubey Neighbourhoods have become spaces produced and used by urban refugees, and this situation has become natural for urban refugees living in these neighbourhoods to lead a life disconnected from other parts of the city. Since international immigrants bring their own cultures and lifestyles with them and the phenomenon of forced migration often causes mass migration, it is inevitable that various foreign textures will form in the cities. John Iceland (2014, p.2) defines this situation as geographical isolations associated with “social exclusion and economic marginalization”. According to this, policies that ensure social cohesion between different social and ethnic groups should be developed and implemented. Also as previously mentioned within the scope of urban regeneration efforts in the region, urban refugees have cheap housing opportunities for themselves in not renewed areas, because local people often move to regenerated areas. At this point, decision makers spatially intervene in the physical fabric of the neighbourhoods, although not directly with the urban refugees.

4.3. *Representational Spaces of Urban Refugees*

Representational spaces include the lived and emotional experiences of perceived and designed spaces. The connection between the use of space and the emotional state of urban refugees cannot be ignored. In addition, the production process of representational spaces is also affected by the feelings of refugees and the way they give meaning and value to spaces. In the context of urban refugees, the points where they feel their identities, their favourite places, the places where they feel safe and comfortable, and the feelings about the place they live are considered as tools to produce representational spaces. Representational spaces are not only a place of experience for urban refugees, but also heterotopic spaces where they show resistance to life by going against the norms.

Urban refugees in the neighbourhoods generally feel good and accumulate positive experiences, especially in commercial and outdoor activities. While some of them still feel like temporary guests and wait to return when a safe environment is established in their home country, many of them openly express their satisfaction with their spatial practices in the neighbourhoods. However, the COVID-19 outbreak had a major impact on this guest identity, both in terms of health services, the ongoing situation in Syria, and movement restrictions.

Besides, the tension between the urban refugees and the existing local people does not decrease, and the social dynamics come into play with all their dominance. Due to the country's lack of a conciliatory policy, local people and urban refugees have become enemies. These arguments caused Syrian urban refugees to move to the surrounding neighbourhoods and dynamical change in their geographies. The places of hope they constructed were replaced by experiences shaped by anxiety.

5. Concluding Remarks

Whatever the type of migration, it is a process of displacement and has a powerful effect on the (re)production of space. In this context, the reflection area for the details of the physical, political, economic and social areas of the Syrian urban refugees, the last period urban minorities, has been examined from a spatial triad and the new public space with new urban codes and new urban practices has been focused on.

Aspects of everyday routine must be injected into spaces designed to address the daily issues of a particular society. The spaces developed and designed based on perceived spaces are dictated by associating the lived experience with these spaces, and they define and control what will be felt. However, this identification and control is not always possible. The lived experience field affects the daily routine according to how it is shaped by interacting with the perceived to some extent. However, what kind of effect it creates depends only on the preferred style of relationship of the designed space, which is built with daily ordinariness and routines.

In the light of this information, the heterotopic spatial practice of Syrian refugees in Önder and Ulubey Neighbourhoods points to a crisis on an urban scale, because a high degree of uncertainty, change, risks and threats have system-wide and complex effects. As stated, in the context of Syrian refugees in Turkey, the interventions of planners and decision makers are insufficient. Thus, the representation of spaces, has less effect on the spatial triad, and the perceived space and the designed space establish a relationship between themselves more. From this point of view, it has been observed that the crisis spaces are transformed into heterotopic, isolated spaces of hope by urban refugees and their urban practices are shaped by these tendencies.

The urban crisis is becoming more chronic, with low level of knowledge about predicted impacts and solutions challenging the symbolic level and social consensus. The political way to overcome the mentioned urban crisis is to produce a new policy structure that will take into account all the humanitarian needs of refugees. The planning path, on the other hand, deals with uncertainty

parameters and covers dynamics such as housing prices and opportunities, social and educational services and infrastructure capacities in the urban context. From this perspective, strategies that will meet short and long-term expectations should be developed and it should not be ignored that uncertainties and risks are high and needs are urgent. The spatial dimension of urban resilience should be focused, and promising resilience characteristics such as diversity, resilience, cooperation, flexibility, adaptability and autonomy should be highlighted in these heterotopic geographies.

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