

Syrian refugees find support, hope in Turkey's peaceful Kilis

A vocational training center is helping Syrian refugees build new lives in the peaceful Turkish border town of Kilis, but more funding is needed to keep it going.

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KILIS, Turkey — On March 24, the Turkish army took control of Syria's Afrin province, with objective of securing the strategic border region from People's Protection Units (YPG) forces that fought in the US-led battle against the Islamic State in northern Syria.

As the Syrian war enters its eighth year, the bloodshed continues to rattle lives inside the war-torn country while forcing a continuing refugee spillover into the neighboring countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. But as Ankara continues to advance in Syria, the climate in Kilis, one of Turkey's most strategic border towns, seems strangely harmonious. Unlike most other such cities in the region, Syrian refugees are living amicably there alongside the host community.

Rama al-Sheikh opened the door with a smile. She is one of the young Syrian refugee volunteers who teaches Turkish at a center called Kareemat in the heart of Kilis. She says it represents hope and integrity for the local Syrian refugee women.

Kareemat was officially formed in 2014 by Rama's older sister Najlaa. What started as regular gatherings for Syrian women in her modest home soon became a full-scale community center for refugees that was initially supported by international aid organizations such as the Danish Refugee Council and private donors.

The sisters are originally from Azaz, Syria, and fled to Turkey by way of Aleppo in 2013. Najlaa was one of the first female protesters to participate in the anti-regime demonstrations back in 2011 — protests that led to the imprisonment of her husband and her expulsion from the university where she was studying psychology.

“We wanted reform, change and equality for all Syrians,” Najlaa said. With Kareemat, Najlaa's goal is to create a safe haven for the many Syrian refugee women and girls in Kilis, many of whom have lost a father or husband in the war.

Many female Syrian refugees are at risk of falling into forced prostitution and sex trafficking — a common yet underreported practice — that stems from economic hardship and social vulnerability. Whether in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey, the issue is seldom discussed within the Syrian refugee population. This third-rail topic also agitated Najlaa,

but in a firm voice, she said, “I didn’t want these women to be given free fish. I wanted them to fish for themselves and teach other Syrian women how to fish to survive, to contribute and to build a life next to the Turks.”

Najlaa and many other Syrians still hope they can one day return to Syria. She said, “I never thought the war would end up like this. We all dream of our homes, but for now, I’d be arrested again by the regime.”

With the assistance of 18 volunteers to date, Kareemat has helped nearly 400 Syrian women with vocational training in areas such as English and Turkish, cosmetology, computer skills, sewing and knitting and other handicrafts. In an effort to empower women, the center offers free daycare services for working Syrian moms and offers Arabic and Turkish classes for those refugees who lack a basic education.

“We want to work and be part of the society while we await the fate of our own home country,” said Najlaa, adding that many Turkish women also take part in classes and act as local partners. “I remember when we first started: I invited my Turkish neighbors and others from the neighborhood over and told them, ‘We want to join your community and not be a burden.’”

Starting in 2013, Kilis was a major hub for IS recruitment and the smuggling of Europeans who wanted to join jihadis in Syria. Mayor Hasan Kala told Al-Monitor the town is home to over 130,000 Syrian refugees and approximately 95,000 Turks who remain in this border town so close to the turbulence of the Syrian war.

“From 2015 to 2016 Kilis was hit by over 97 IS rockets, and since January the Kurdish forces began shooting into Kilis and launched 37 rockets into our town,” said Kala. He pointed to one of his security guards and said, “A rocket fell right next to his brother's home. But despite all the chaos, it didn’t disrupt our peace here in Kilis.”

Political rifts, sectarian divides and historical feuds have posed many difficulties for displaced Syrians in assimilating within their host communities in Lebanon and Jordan, both of which are struggling to cope with the overwhelming influx of refugees. In particular, it's a complex problem in Lebanon, a country of 5 million officially hosting over a million Syrians, plus an additional 500,000 that local organizations say are not registered with the UN. Lebanon also hosts nearly 500,000 Palestinian refugees and continues to grapple with memories of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon that began in 1976.

“In Lebanon and Jordan, you have Arabs versus Arabs; here, we don’t have that attitude and divide,” said Kala, who is well aware of the dangers of extremist sleeper cells. “If we don’t accept them, we will not only hurt them but will hurt ourselves in the long term.” She explained the need to uproot terrorism and why it’s more important than ever to avoid division between the host community and the refugees, saying, “Anyone who can’t become part of a community can become mischievous. Acceptance is far better than casting out people. Harmonizing is the first step in preventing terrorism.”

Najlaa's work in Kilis inspired the mayor, who opened 11 community centers over the past year to better integrate refugees within the Turkish community. Kala said the more than 400 employees — equally divided between Syrians and Turks — in the centers have served 5,000 Turks and Syrians to date. There are also 138 Syrian and Turkish volunteers who assist in teaching sewing, first aid, English and Turkish as well as computer courses for adults.

Najlaa opened up about Kareemat’s financial hardships, saying, “I have never felt this low in my entire life. We were the first to open such a center in Kilis and inspired others — and

the local municipality — to open up centers like ours — but look at us now.” By the end of spring, Najlaa may be forced to shut the center down, unable to pay its rent. Najlaa is struggling to keep the doors open for the many local and refugee women who regard Kareemat as home.

Kala said donor fatigue and financial challenges for the local municipality and the Turkish government at large are spelling uncertainties for this amicable environment.

“I’m worried about the women. What will happen to them?” said Najlaa, adding, “Kareemat is like a tree. It’s growing and we can see its growth and now suddenly we have to cut it.”

Fearing a refugee spillover into Europe, the European Union in March promised 3 billion euros (\$3.7 billion) to help fund the 3.5 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey — a country of 72 million that serves as a strategic gateway between the Middle East and Europe.

“I want to be a journalist and tell the story of Syrian people,” said Rama as she looked over into her sister’s worried eyes. “I don’t think anyone is telling the real story of the Syrian people and how we are striving to survive.”

On the second floor of the old building, Marwa (a pseudonym) was breastfeeding her newborn son, Jamana. She is a Syrian refugee who frequents the center with her mother, Nadia. They fled their homes in Aleppo and spend most of their days in Kareemat.

“I have five children,” said Mawra. “We need to find a way to support our families. This place is like our new home.” Her bright green eyes were filled with hope as she gave her son to her mother and resumed knitting.

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