Double Troubled: Syrian Gay Men in Istanbul

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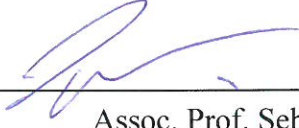

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ABSTRACT

Syrian refugee crisis started in 2011 affected lives of millions of people. While the numbers of Syrian refugee population outside Syria vary in different countries, Turkey currently hosts more Syrian refugee population than any other country does. It has been eight years since the first refugee group arrived in Turkey and xenophobia is rising dramatically. In the social arena of Turkey where xenophobia and homophobia are becoming more ordinary, Syrian gay men find themselves in a double discriminated position. This thesis sheds light into what it means to be a refugee, gay, and Syrian in Turkey – focusing particularly on Syrian gay men who are either living in Istanbul or used to live in Istanbul before their resettlement into a third country in Western Europe. It explores the various contexts in which shifting identities and the senses of belonging change and reshape lives of those people who claim their reason for escape on the ground of their sexual orientation. Through the lenses of masculinities theory and social network theory, the aim of this thesis is to disclose the realities of social borders through which experiences of Syrian gay men are shaped.

ÖZET

2011 yılında başlayan Suriye mülteci krizi milyonlarca insanın hayatını etkiledi. Suriye haricindeki ülkelerde Suriyeli mülteci sayısı değişiklik gösterirken, Türkiye en çok mülteci nüfusa ev sahipliği yapan ülke durumunda. İlk mülteci grubun Türkiye'ye gelişinin üzerinden sekiz yıl geçti ve zenofobi artmaya devam ediyor. Homofobinin ve zenofobinin sıradanlaştığı Türkiye'de ise Suriyeli gey erkekler kendilerini çifte ayrımcılığı uğramış bir pozisyonda buluyorlar. Bu tez halen İstanbul'da yaşayan ya da bir zamanlar yaşamış Suriyeli gey erkeklere odaklanarak Türkiye'de mülteci, gey ve Suriyeli olmanın anlamlarını araştırıyor. Aynı zamanda ülkeden ayrılma sebeplerine cinsel yönelimlerine de temellendiren kişilerin yeni ülkelerindeki aidiyetlerini ve dönüşen kimlik algılarını sorguluyor. Bunları yaparken tezin amacı erkeksilikler teorisi ve sosyal ağlar teorisinin yardımıyla Suriyeli gey erkeklerin deneyimlerinin şekillendiği toplumsal sınırları açığa çıkarmaktır.

CONTENT

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names of my colleagues Ayşe Çelikbilek Cihan and Melike Çetindemir for a better understanding towards migration field as a researcher and professional in the field.

I dedicate this thesis to the loving memories of my grandmother Nezihe Saylam and my uncle Erhan Saylam.

ABBREVIATIONS

DGMM – Directorate General of Migration Management

EU – European Union

ICMC – International Catholic Migration Commission

IDMC – Internal Displacement Monitoring Center

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

LFIP – Law on Foreigners and International Protection

LGBTI – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

ORAM – Organization for Refuge, Asylum, and Migration

SPoD – Social Policies, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation Studies Association

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissionaire for Refugees

UN – United Nations

TABLES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

June 28th, 2015. It was a shiny summer day in Istanbul, not different from the other days. People at Istiklal Street, the most famous and touristic spot of Istanbul, were wandering around and enjoying the sunny weekend. Although everything seemed usual, one could distinguish unusual police clusters in each alley. June 28th was not as ordinary as it seemed, but it was the annual Gay Pride Parade day in Istanbul and the municipal government had banned the parade due to security concerns.

When I arrived in Taksim Square, a historic square next to Istiklal Street where most protests are taken place, an enthusiastic crowd with banners, posters, and rainbow flags were already there. Back in that time, I was volunteering for an LGBTI organization and there were several familiar faces that I recognize at the first instance. Yet, I approached Mohammad[1] who was a regular participant of the LGBTI organization's tea and talk sessions for Syrian LGBTI individuals. Mohammad is a Syrian gay man who fled from his home country due to security concerns he has been facing in an environment where radical religious organizations threatened him on the basis of his sexual orientation. As I saw Mohammad I realized how vigorous and happy he was. He was chanting slogans and he was holding a banner in Arabic. He told me in the middle of chanting slogans: *Can you believe it? We are here, out and proud! We are celebrating our existence without the fear of execution!*

I have been attending pride parades since 2011 and I had never had any trouble during pride parades in Istanbul. Thus, I smiled at Mohammad because he was enjoying the parade and also was proud of who he is. He was among such a crowd for the first time and he had never experienced saying his sexual orientation out loud. We joined the throng with thousands of other people who had gathered there to demand equal rights for LGBTI community in Turkey and to celebrate the end of Istanbul Pride Week. However, when the crowd started to rally, police forces attacked the crowd by firing tear gas and water to disperse it[2]. The next

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time I saw Mohammad in Cihangir, a neighborhood close to Istiklal Street, he was soaked and lost his joy and energy. After the parade had been dispersed and "public order" was established, Mohammad and I sat at a café. He was confused, upset and seemed a little desperate to me. He said: *For a moment I thought I can live in Turkey. At least I can be who I am. But no! Your country doesn't even let you be who you are. And, think of me! A gay Syrian. I have no chance in Turkey.*

In a couple of months, Mohammad applied for resettlement into a third country and left Turkey for the Netherlands one and a half years later. Mohammad neither was nor will be the one and only Syrian gay man who is looking for a safe haven because of the threats on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. There are still many gay refugee men – Syrian or other nationalities – in Turkey who are waiting for their files to be approved and for being resettled into a third country mostly in Europe or Canada. According to a report launched by UNHCR "LGBTI asylum-seekers and refugees are subject to severe social exclusion and violence in countries of asylum by both the host community and the broader asylum-seeker and refugee community" (2015). While being a refugee in general, and a Syrian in particular, is difficult for those people, being an LGBTI Syrian refugee makes it even more difficult, as it connotes double discrimination often without support of their own community.

Although the LGBTI movement in Turkey is relatively more visible and powerful comparing to other Middle Eastern countries, there is still no legal protection for LGBTI people under Turkish laws. Yet, Turkey is a signatory of The Council of Europe Convention which is also known as Istanbul Convention and aiming to protect women against all kinds of abuse and violence. Istanbul Convention is significant in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation because the convention determines gender and sex as two different notions and also "requires parties to take the necessary measures to promote changes in the social and

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cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men with a view to eradicating customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men".[3]

Unfortunately, cases of homophobia and transphobia are still high and hate speech against LGBTI people is common in Turkey. Hate crimes against LGBTI individuals, especially against transsexual women, are also widespread. According to a report by Trans Europe, crimes against transgender people put Turkey in the first rank in Europe and the ninth rank in the world.[4] In other words, Turkey is not the best safe haven for LGBTI people, neither for local ones nor for the refugees.

An article about LGBTI refugees in Turkey published by Danny Deza on a website starts with the following sentence: "When you are queer in the Middle East, escaping war doesn't mean you've escaped the people who want you dead".[5] The tragic story of Muhammed Wisam Sankari[6] demonstrates that Middle Eastern queer people are never safe and even if they escape from their homelands, their lives are still under threat perpetuated by several social institutions, including religion, politics, law, economy, and even their own families. On top of everything, the hegemonic masculinity of the country that they flee to be free discriminate them openly.

1.1. Research Purpose

Following the ban of and police attack to Istanbul Pride Parade in 2015, the Governorate of Istanbul did not allow the parade in the following years as well. Most recently, in 2019, the governorate declared that the parade is banned and supporters of LGBTI rights in Turkey could not walk for their demand for equal rights. It is a reality that Turkey is getting more conservative in every sphere of social and political life, therefore LGBTI people who are marginalized and thought to be a threat to public morality are under constant social and

political pressure. Not only LGBTI people feel the pressure of rising neo-conservativism, but also people from different ethnic and national backgrounds suffer as well. Turkish people started complaining about Syrian refugees a couple of years ago, but recently these complaints are being told out loud and the mainstream media adds fuel to the already fragile yet hostile environment. In a social atmosphere where xenophobia and homophobia is rising dramatically, Syrian gay men find themselves in a double discriminated position.

This thesis sheds light into what it means to be a refugee, gay, and Syrian in Turkey – focusing particularly on Syrian gay men who are either living in Istanbul or used to live in Istanbul before their resettlement into a third country in Western Europe. It explores the various contexts in which shifting identities and senses of belonging change and reshape lives of those people who claim their reason for escape on the ground of their sexual orientation. From the individual level to the social and political factors, this thesis endeavors to comprehend and depict the realities of social borders through which experiences of my participants are shaped. Those social borders for my participants are not limited only to Turkey, but also to their home country, Syria, and to Europe as well. By focusing on their lives in Syria, in Turkey, and also in Europe, this thesis tries to illuminate the migration trajectories of Syrian gay men from Syria to Turkey and to Europe. In order to be able to display this migration experience, I was interested not only in their experiences during their time in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, but also in their lives and experiences back in Syria, and their hopes and expectations in the future when and if they are settled in a third country.

In order to achieve my research objectives, I pose following questions:

1- *How do social and cultural indicators concerning sexual orientation in Syria influence their understandings of sexual identity of Syrian gay men?*

2- *Where do refugee laws and migration agenda of the Turkish state locate Syrian gay men? In what ways do legal procedures determine how Syrian gay men comprehend their position in the social sphere?*
3- *How do Syrian gay men in Istanbul interact with different social, political, and legal agencies and institutions? How do they form their social networks after arriving in Turkey?*

1.2.   Methodology

This thesis combines narrative research and participant observation as qualitative design method. Narrative research allowed me to acquire subjective experiences of each participant and understand their position within their lived and told stories. Through the face-to-face interviews that I conducted with Syrian gay men, I tried to be able to understand how Syrian gay men determine and shape social networks during their migration journey from their homeland to Turkey and even to Europe and how they manipulate interactions with other people and even with institutions. By searching their past and present experiences through narrative research, I had the chance to comparatively grasp and depict their life histories.

Since narrative research limits me by only focusing on told stories and experiences, I believe participant observation allowed me to capture untold stories and experiences behind my participants' migration journey. Although my interviews were semi-structured and comprised open-ended questions, which allow my participants to open up and tell more about their story, at times they might have kept certain parts of their lives to themselves whether willingly or unwillingly. Yet, during my participant observation sessions, participants felt more at ease in their conversations and their attitudes because they were among their trusted and beloved friends.

My participants with whom interviews were made were 7 self-identified Syrian gay men. 5 of them were living in Turkey at the time of interviews and 2 of them were resettled

into Europe shortly after our interview. The interviews took place between May 2017 and July 2018. The first interviewee had been resettled in Germany in September 2017 and the second one had been resettled in the Netherlands in February 2018. After their resettlement, I made skype interviews with them concerning their life and experiences in Europe. Two out of these 7 interviewees were already resettled into a third country in Europe. In short, interviewees were the ones who either still lives in Turkey or used to live in Turkey before their resettlement in a third country.

The participants were chosen through the snowball sampling technique. I first met with two of participants in a local LGBTI organization's tea and talk session for Syrian LGBTI refugees. After I was able to attend those sessions, I met several other Syrian gay men. One interviewee introduced me to another one and I was able to make in-depth interviews with 7 self-identified Syrian gay men. At the same time, I started doing participant observation in that local LGBTI organization's tea and talk sessions. After some time, I became friends with some of the session's participants and they invited me to house-gatherings and night-outs. Thus, I was able to observe my participants in their everyday lives. Among those 7 interviewees, one of them was speaking Turkish fluently and the rest was fluent in English. Thus, I did not need the assistance of any interpreter during the interviews. Yet, being fluent in English before coming to Turkey discloses education level and socio-economic status of the informants. Five of the informants hold bachelor' degree and two of them could not higher education due to civil war in Syria, however they have continued their education in university in the countries that they have been resettled. In addition to that, all informants had lived in major cities, like Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Lazakia.

Yet, I have also faced with some limitations during my research. No matter how much they affiliated me with their social environment, most of Syrian gay men whom I met did not accept my request to make interview. That is because I am working in a UNHCR related job

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and UNHCR is the institution that applies resettlement interviews and decides eligibility of one's resettlement into the third country. Some of them also told me that their interview with me for my research might affect their resettlement interview with UNHCR. Although that is not true, I was not able to convince the vast majority of them.

1.3.   Structure of the Thesis and Chapters

After the Introduction part, this thesis continues with an informative chapter on migration. It explains the history of migratory flows into the Turkish state with a special reference to the Syrian refugee crisis and legal regulations concerning Syrian refugees. Therefore, this chapter would be beneficial in order to understand political, legal, and social grounds before mentioning the unique position of Syrian gay men in Turkey.

Chapter 3 takes up the second major concept of the thesis which is LGBTI issues. In this chapter, I will briefly mention the history of LGBTI rights movement in Turkey, then I will focus on media coverage on refugees and LGBTI refugees in Turkey, in particular on those who are mostly Syrian. The aim is to illuminate mainstream media's view towards LGBTI people and refugees. Lastly, I will investigate queer migration literature and the ways that literature deals with problems related to queer migration phenomenon.

In the Chapter 4 I explained the profile the participants in this research and discussed my observations on tea and talk sessions during which Syrian gay men socialized and shared their experiences and emotions. This chapter is important to understand those men's everyday life experiences in Syria and in Turkey as it focuses on their lives, coming-out stories, their migration journey, new experiences in the new cultural and social environment(s) and future expectations and aspirations.

In Chapter 5, I present the findings of my research through which I mention the ways through which my participants deal with in their everyday life in order to survive as gay men within social, political, and legal boundaries.   In order to expound on their experiences, I opted for masculinities theory and social capital theory.

Following Chapter 5, the thesis is concluded by offering suggestions for future academic research.

CHAPTER 2: SETTING

In this chapter, I will mention Turkey's migration history since the Turkish Republic's establishment as a modern country in 1923. In order to understand the current refugee flux into Turkey and legislations concerning this particular humanitarian crisis, it is significant to understand the previous migration history as well as legal background and changes within the years. Additionally, in this chapter, I will use data accessed by UNHCR and DGMM in order to show the extent of the refugee population in Turkey from the very beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Since the start of the civil war in 2011, millions of Syrians have left their home country in search of a safe haven. According to the UNCHR data, there are 5,627,690 Syrians classified under persons of concern located in different countries by June 3rd, 2019. The number of Syrian population outside of Syria varies in different countries is indicated in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1: Total Persons of Concern by Country of Asylum

Total Persons of Concern by Country of Asylum — JSON

Location name	Source	Data date	Population	
Turkey	UNHCR, Government of Turkey	16 May 2019	64.1%	3,606,737
Lebanon	UNHCR	31 May 2019	16.6%	935,454
Jordan	UNHCR	3 Jun 2019	11.8%	664,330
Iraq	UNHCR	31 May 2019	4.5%	252,983
Egypt	UNHCR	30 Apr 2019	2.4%	132,473
Other (North Africa)	UNHCR	30 Nov 2018	0.6%	35,713

Source: UNHCR. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#_ga=2.169712290.2078113201.1561116326-253159005.1499944476 Retrieved on June 21st, 2019

As can be seen from Table 1 above, with 3.6 million refugees, Turkey currently hosts more Syrian refugee population than any other country. This number highlights the people under temporary protection granted to Syrian nationals only whereas at least 65,000 Syrians stay in Turkey with residence permits and an unknown number still undocumented and not registered (Koser Akcapar and Simsek, 2018: 177). In addition, the Turkish Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, recently stated that 80,000 Syrians acquired Turkish citizenship[7]. Lebanon and Jordan follow Turkey in the list, yet the majority – 64,1% of Syrians who were forced to leave Syria – currently live in Turkey. According to the government officials, the numbers in Lebanon and Jordan are said to be a little higher as Lebanon stopped counting those entering the country as of 2016 and there were some irregular flows across the Syrian-Jordanian border.

Although refugee influx is not a new concept for Turkey, it has never been experienced at such an unprecedented scale. From the very beginning of the first wave of Syrian arrivals into the Turkish border, Turkey started developing some formal and informal *ad hoc* approaches to regulate entries.

For the first part of this chapter, I will expound brief migration history and legal guidelines and procedures, including Turkey's unique position as regards the 1951 United Nations (UN) Geneva Convention on Refugees and 1967 Protocol. By doing so, I will try to provide the background concerning migration in Turkey and the Syrian refugee crisis with regard to its effects on the Turkish state and society.

2.1. Brief Migration History towards Turkey

Throughout the history of modern nation-state ever since the establishment of the Republic, Turkey has historically been both migrant-receiving and migrant-sending country. However, one could argue that the Turkish state's position regarding migration and reception

of refugees is still transforming to meet the challenges of migration alongside the security nexus. Therefore, Turkey's policies on emigration and immigration have been changed accordingly. İçduygu and Aksel divide the Turkish state's migration history into four important cornerstones. The first one is two-way immigration and emigration circulation between 1923 and 1950s (2013: 170-2). Since the core ideology behind the modern Turkish state was the formation of a nation-state consisting of somewhat homogenous population rather than ethnically and religiously mixed one, Turkification and Islamization of the population determined these initial policies and regulations regarding migration.

The homogenization of the population was based on a dual pattern: emigration of mainly Greeks and Armenians, in other words, emigration of non-Muslim population from Anatolia, and immigration of Turkish Muslim population, mainly from the Balkans (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 170-1). The very first movement for the homogenization of population was population exchange between Turkey and Greece dating back 1923. According to Agreement made between Turkey and Greece right after the Lausanne Treaty, people of Muslim descent would migrate to Turkey and people of Greek Orthodox descent would migrate to Greece.[8] In the end of this population exchange, both countries achieved to 'cleanse' their populations from religiously different ones. As a result of population exchange, approximately 1,2 million Rums of Turkey were exchanged with 350 thousand Muslims of Greece (Grigoriadis, 2008: 24). The exceptions were the Greeks in Istanbul and Muslims in Western Thrace. While the Ministry of Population Exchange, Development and Settlement was established right before this population exchange, the new constitution in 1924, the Turkish Citizenship Law in 1928, and the Law on Settlement in 1934 empowered the state's attempts towards Turkification and Islamization of the population (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 171).

The 1934 Law on Settlement is important as it mainly facilitated migration and integration of those of "Turkish descent and culture" in Turkey either as migrants or as

refugees while preventing the entry of those who did not meet these ethnic and religious criteria (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 171). In other words, the state locked up the doors in order to keep the population ethnically, culturally, and religiously as homogeneous as possible.

The second important cornerstone in the migration history of the Turkish state is the migration boom after the 1950s. This period differed from the previous one in terms of new forms of national and international agenda. First of all, the migration boom period is best recognized with labor emigration from Turkey to European countries followed by rural-urban migration in Turkey. During the 1960s, the rising unemployment rate was among the top issues on the state's agenda. At that time, European countries needed labor force in order to re-develop and empower their industries. Thus, through "state-sponsored emigration and official agreements between the Turkish state and the labor-demanding industrial countries" (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 173), Turkey had the opportunity to decrease unemployment rates and employment pressures in the country. This was clearly seen as a win-win strategy at the time both for Turkey and for Western Europe. The main idea behind this state-sponsored emigration was that it would be a temporary one and Turkish state eventually "would benefit from emigrants' economic (export of surplus labor power and remittances) and cultural (transfer of knowledge and know-how) capital that they would gain in Europe" (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 173). As is well-known, this emigration had not been temporary even after the oil crisis in 1973 due to couple of reasons ranging from political and economic situation of the home country in the 1970s. Besides, the integration of Turkish emigrants to the labor markets in Western Europe, and the reluctance of employers to send skilled workers back to Turkey halted the return migration to a great extent. So, most of the Turkish *gastarbeiter* stayed on, and joined with their families under the family reunification scheme and marriage migration in the 1980s and 1990s. At least 3.5 million Turkish immigrants live in Germany and a total of 6 million Turkish immigrants have established an increasingly vigorous yet fragmented

Turkish diaspora spreading over many countries but especially in the EU, US, Canada, and Australia with the last 5 decades (Koser Akcapar, 2018).

This period also signifies Turkey's willingness to integrate the global migration regime into national legislation. Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention and the 1967 Protocol which determined the status of refugees and asylum-seekers. Through 1951 Convention, Turkey agreed to be bound by the terms of the convention, however it pushed for the introduction of a time and geographical limitation to the Convention (Kirişçi, 2003: 83). Through 1967 Protocol, Turkey accepted to lift the time limitation, but insisted on maintaining geographical limitation until today. According to the geographical limitation, only those who flee from the countries of the Council of Europe would be granted refugee status in Turkey. In other words, Turkey does not grant refugee status for those who do not come from Europe (Kirişçi, 2007: 94). Interestingly enough, asylum applications in Turkey were made by non-Europeans. According to Kirişçi (2007), the geographical limitation was kept because of the Turkish state's fear of huge migration or refugee influx and for national security reasons. It is also used as a bargaining tool for the accession process to the European Union in the early 2000s. This geographical limitation still affects the Turkish state's policies on migration and stalemates policies and has an impact on the decision-making process on the Syrian refugee crisis, which will be mentioned in the second section of this chapter.

The third important period in the migration history of the Turkish state is between 1980 and 2000. This era signifies new migration patterns due to changing political and economic climate both nationally and internationally (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 176). Right before and soon after the 1980 *coup d'état*, there was another major influx to Western Europe from Turkey in the form of asylum-seeking. At the same time, forced migrants mainly from Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq who fled from the brutal regimes in their homelands and failing states started to come to Turkey as of early 1980s. In 1989, Turkey opened its doors to many

ethnic Turks escaping from the ailing communist regime at last stand and its discriminatory attitudes in Bulgaria. In 1991, Turkey faced with yet another mass refugee influx from northern Iraq due to severe violence against religious and ethnic minorities in the neighboring country. At that time Turkey did not have any clauses or modalities specifically addressing mass refugee issues. Depending on the ethnic identity of those incoming asylum seekers, Turkish authorities adopted different strategies. While harboring Kurdish refugees from northern Iraq along the Iraqi border at the height of PKK violence and Kurdish demands for more recognition, Bulgarian Turks were welcomed as ethnic kin and even used as part of political propaganda.

Although Turkey has been an immigrant country ever since the foundation of the Republic, the incoming forced migrants were mostly 'foreigners' who were not of Turkish descent (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 175). Only after 1994 Asylum Regulation, Turkey defined the conditions for applying for asylum in Turkey, however did not lift geographical limitation. Thus, non-Europeans who fled from their home countries could stay in Turkey only until their eventual resettlement in a third country by the UNHCR. With the geographical limitation in place and no opportunity and intention to integrate in Turkey, they were even considered as 'transit refugees' (Koser Akcapar, 2017: 3). In other words, for the first time during this period, Turkey has become a hub attracting forced migrants of non-Turkish descent with the intention of reaching to Europe. Most of them were irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers, thus they were considered 'illegal' under the Turkish law.

The fourth and the last cornerstone in the migration history of the Turkish state starts from the early 2000s onwards. As power of globalization deepens all over the world, Turkey's liberal market economy, especially the large informal economy, factors in attracting labour migration into Turkey (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 179). While globalization has been an external factor that affects Turkey's destiny as a migration transition country, Turkey's liberal

economic policies also act as a pull factor for many economic migrants mainly from the Central Asian Republics, Southern Caucasus and Eastern Europe into the country. While some work legally after obtaining work permits, there are also many more who overstay their visas and work in the country without the necessary documentation. Furthermore, due to their overstaying visas, entry to Turkey via illegal border crossings, and employment in the informal economy, many asylum seekers and refugees share the same resources and fate usually with these irregular economic migrants.

Migration policy in 2000s has been largely shaped by Turkey-EU relations. Turkey's candidature to the EU and its lengthy and rocky accession process was the driving force for policy making on the issues of migration. While Turkey tried to adapt its migration policies to EU Accession Partnership requisites, old-established regulations stood in the way for more liberal policies regarding migration issues. For example, the new Settlement Law in 2006 though aiming to ensure the liberalization of migration policies and to promulgate regulations in order to match international standards, it persisted on limiting immigration to Turkey for the people of Turkish descent (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013: 179-180).

Migration history of the Turkish state first identified itself with the characteristics of nation and nation-state. Therefore, as stated earlier, the first legislations concerning migration took into account individuals of Turkish descent and tried to create a homogenous population within the borders. The second period between 1950s and 1980 witnessed state-sponsored emigration to Europe in order to diminish the effect of unemployment and gain a more qualified labor force in the long run. After the 1980 coup d'état, Turkish politics turned towards neoliberal policies and the rising power of globalization affected Turkey as a migration transition country. In the last period, from 2000s until today, Turkey tried to liberalize its migration policies and harmonize new regulations with international standards. Yet, liberalization of migration policies and regulations has not been as successful as planned.

No doubt that Syrian refugee crisis which started in 2011 influenced politics of migration deeply. Even before that, Turkey started introducing new laws and/or legislations concerning irregular and circular economic migrants and also for the sake of EU Accession Process. For example, "[i]n 2003, Turkey adopted the law on work permits for foreigners (No. 4817), mainly addressing the growing number of irregular and circular economic migrants working in the informal sector" (Koser Akcapar, 2017: 4). This law even paved the way for the introduction of Turquoise Card in 2016 "which enables permanent work permits for those considered of strategic importance, determined by indicators such as education level, professional experience, and investments, and provides residence permits for the holder's spouse and children" (Koser Akcapar, 2017: 4-5). 2006 and 2009 were also critical years for a change in policy in migration issues. For example, in 2006, Turkey made some amendments in the Settlement Law (No. 5543) that dated back to the 1930s, and in 2009, to the Citizenship Law (No. 5901). As such, the new Settlement Law that replaced the 1934 Resettlement Law (Law No. 2510) maintained the definition of migrants as those of Turkish descent despite the relaxation in other aspects" (Koser Akcapar, 2017: 5).

After 2011, Turkey – as a neighboring country – had to reconsider and re-plan its migration and asylum policies and regulations. Turkish authorities have only recently acknowledged that it has turned into an immigration country and address the need to put integration policies in place (Koser Akcapar and Simsek, 2018: 185). Then Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım mentioned at the Symposium on Migration and Integration on 15 December 2017 in Ankara that:

> *Assimilation policy does not exist in our belief system, in our culture*
> *and in our state traditions. Our relationship with refugees was based*
> *on muhajir and ensar. The main duty of migrants is to integrate with*

the [Turkish] society and to obey the laws. One thing we cannot

tolerate is migrants disregarding this country's values.[9]

However, as witnessed all around the globe, the refugee issue has become more and more politicized and securitized. Therefore, the media discourses and political statements range from eventual return of all refugees to peaceful coexistence and harmonization if only Syrians are willing to adapt.

2.2. Syrian Refugee Crisis and Legal Regulations

The first reaction against Assad regime in Syria started in March 15th, 2011 and it turned into an armed conflict, then escalated to a civil war. Due to the ongoing civil war, many people left their homes behind and escaped from the war area to the safer zones, which are mostly the neighboring countries. According to press statement made by UNHCR and IDMC in May 14, 2014, in every 60 seconds, one family was fleeing inside Syria.[10] Today, the number of Syrian refugees reached 5,635,061 while the number of internally displaced people within Syrian amounted to 6,199,000.

The first immigrant group from Syria arrived in Turkey on April 29, 2011 and they were settled in a tent city in Yayladağ in Hatay which is a bordering city to Syria. This was followed by two other group arrivals of Syrians on June 9th, 2011 and on June 12th, 2011. They were first settled in Altınözü in Hatay and Boynuyoğun in Adana, respectively (Erdoğan, 2015: 7). Turkish government declared urgency on the issue and organized humanitarian aid campaign with the help of international and local NGOs for those who were affected by the civil war. Early arrivals were small in number and international actors were negotiating a ceasefire. While negotiation for a ceasefire was on the process, Turkish government constructed additional tent cities in the southern provinces of Hatay, Gaziantep, and Kilis

(İçduygu, 2015: 6). After the failure of the negotiations for a ceasefire, the civil war in Syria

escalated and the numbers of people seeking a safe place in neighboring countries increased.

Table 2. Distribution of Syrian Refugees in Turkey by Year
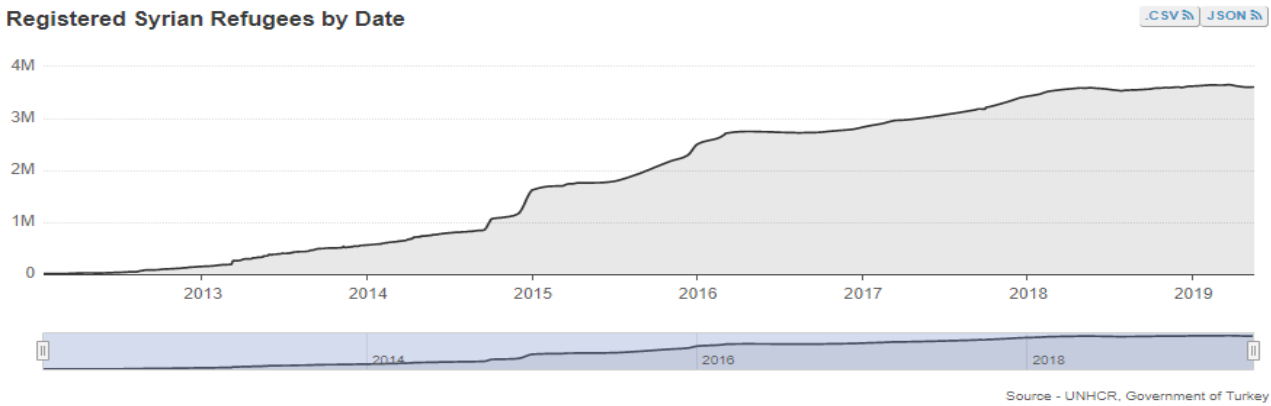
Source: UNHCR. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113. Retrieved on June 21st, 2019

Table 3. Distribution of Syrian Refugees in Turkey by Year (by DGMM)

YILLARA GÖRE GEÇİCİ KORUMA KAPSAMINDAKİ SURİYELİLER

T.C. İÇİŞLERİ BAKANLIĞI GÖÇ İDARESİ GENEL MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ
Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü verisidir

2011: 0
2012: 14.237
2013: 224.655
2014: 1.519.286
2015: 2.503.549
2016: 2.834.441
2017: 3.426.786
2018: 3.623.192
2019: 3.613.644*

*13.06.2019 tarihi itibariyla
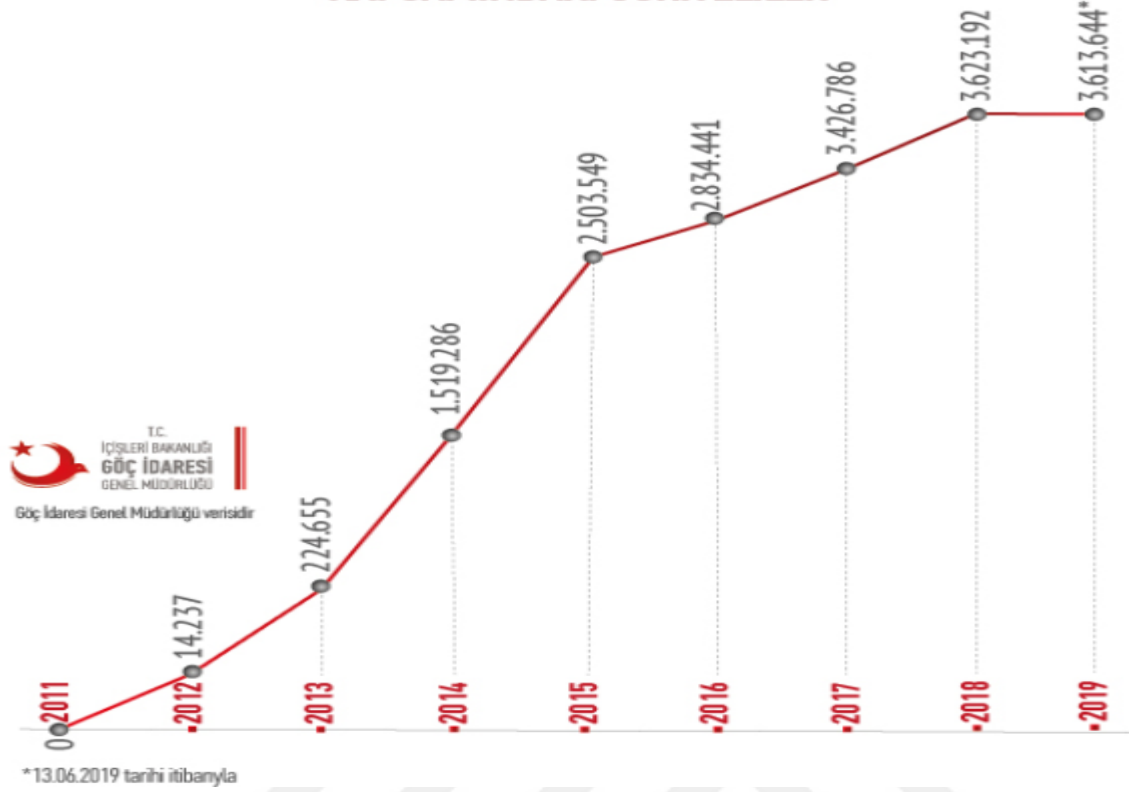
Source: DGMM website: http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik Retrieved on June 21st, 2019.

Table 2 and Table 3 above clearly point out the intensification of Syrian population in Turkey over the years. As part of the initial open door policy, their numbers became seven times higher comparing to each previous year after 2013. After 2014, the numbers continued to increase and now even with the sealed borders, the current number of registered Syrian population in Turkey is 3,613,644 as of June 13th, 2019. While the return migration is at a very small scale, the number of returnees especially to the areas after the military operations are reported as almost 300,000 in early 2019[11].

Since the number of Syrian immigrants is huge and they cannot be granted refugee status under the geographical limitation clause of the 1951 Convention relating to the status of Refugees, Turkish government enacted legislation regarding the legal status of Syrian immigrants. As a result, legislation on Temporary Protection (*Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği)*

was enacted in October 22nd, 2014 (Erdoğan, 2015: 45). Through this legislation, the 'asylum-seeker' status was abolished, and three other statuses, conditional refugee (*şartlı mülteci*), subsidiary protection (*ikincil koruma*), and temporary protection *(geçici koruma)*, were promulgated.

The definition of conditional refugee is as follows:

"A person who as a result of events occurring outside European countries and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it, shall be granted conditional refugee status upon completion of the refugee status determination process. Conditional refugees shall be allowed to reside in Turkey temporarily until they are resettled to a third country." (LFIP[12] – Article no: 62)

Through this article, Turkey persisted on maintaining geographical limitation for granting asylum and allows people to stay in Turkey until they were resettled in a third country or repatriated voluntarily until the war is over.

The definition of subsidiary protection is as follows:

A foreigner or a stateless person, who neither could be qualified as a refugee nor as a conditional refugee, shall nevertheless be granted subsidiary protection upon the status determination because if returned to the country of origin or country of [former] habitual residence would:

a) be sentenced to death or face the execution of the death penalty;

b) face torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;

c) face serious threat to himself or herself by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or nationwide armed conflict; and therefore is unable or for the reason of such threat is unwilling, to avail himself or herself of the protection of his country of origin or country of [former] habitual residence. (LFIP – Article no: 63)

The status of subsidiary protection ensures that the person will not be deported and sent back to his or her country because of lack of conditions regarding security of life.

Lastly, the definition of temporary protection is as follows:

(1) Temporary protection may be provided for foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, cannot return to the country that they have left, and have arrived at or crossed the borders of Turkey in a mass influx situation seeking immediate and temporary protection.

(2) The actions to be carried out for the reception of such foreigners into Turkey; their stay in Turkey and rights and obligations; their exit from Turkey; measures to be taken to prevent mass influxes; cooperation and coordination among national and international institutions and organizations; determination of the duties and mandate of the central and provincial institutions and organizations shall be stipulated in a Directive to be issued by the Council of Ministers. (LFIP – Article no: 91)

Through this article on temporary protection, the law recognized and ensured the protection of people in times of humanitarian crisis. This article and the status of temporary protection is vital for Syrian refugees' stay in Turkey, however the duration is not specified.

According to the data of DGMM[13], İstanbul has the highest Syrian population in Turkey with 546,296 Syrian people. Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, and Hatay, respectively, follow İstanbul. İstanbul, Hatay, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa are the cities that have the higher Syrian population than other cities in Turkey. While Hatay, Şanlıurfa, and Gaziantep host large Syrian population as they are bordering cities to Syria, the reason why İstanbul attracts more

refugees is because of the city's stance as the economic and financial capital of Turkey. In the city of Kilis – right across the Syrian border – the number of Syrian refugees is higher than the local inhabitants: 93.000 and 114.904 respectively. Within the years, it has become a buffer zone between Turkey and Syria and target of both ISIS and Asad regime (Koser Akcapar and Simsek, 2018: 177). Also DGMM data shows that only 3.03% (109,262 people) of these immigrants live in camps while 96.97% (3,504,382 people) are outside of camps as of June 13th, 2019 (see Table 4 and Table 5). So, Syrian refugees in Turkey has gradually become part and parcel of urban refugee phenomenon in the world.

Table 4. Syrian Population by Top 10 Provinces
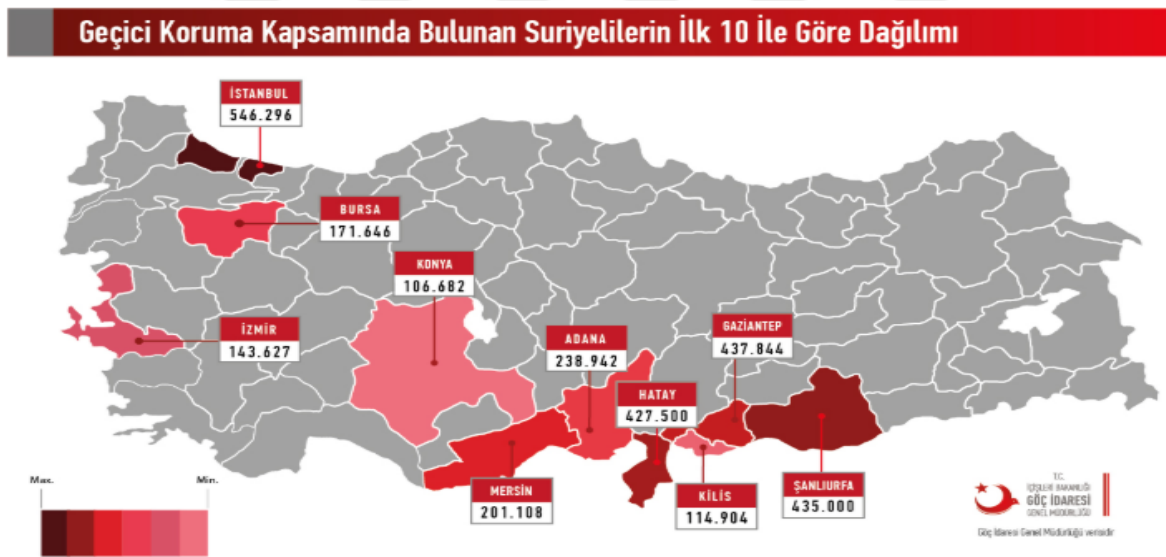
Source: DGMM, http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik **Retrieved on June 21st, 2019**

Table 5. Distribution of Syrians Living in and Outside of Camps

GEÇİCİ BARINMA MERKEZLERİ İÇİNDE VE DIŞINDA KALAN SURIYELİLER
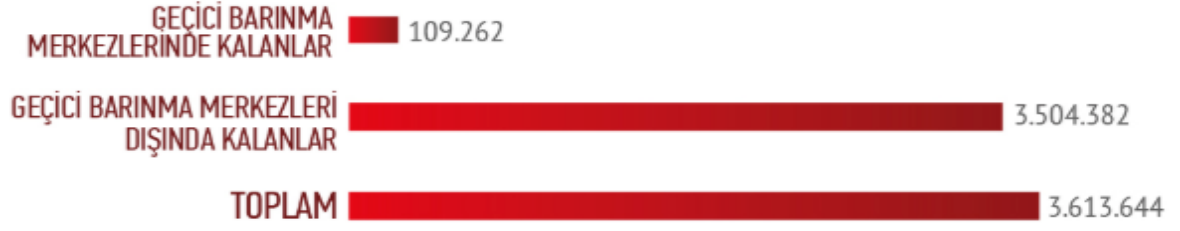
GEÇİCİ BARINMA MERKEZLERİNDE KALANLAR — 109.262

GEÇİCİ BARINMA MERKEZLERİ DIŞINDA KALANLAR — 3.504.382

TOPLAM — 3.613.644

Source: DGMM, http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik Retrieved on June 21st, 2019.

Table 6. Distribution of Syrian Refugees in Camps

GEÇİCİ KORUMA KAPSAMINDAKİ SURİYELİLERİN GEÇİCİ BARINMA MERKEZLERİNE GÖRE DAĞILIMI
(8 İlde 13 Barınma Merkezi)

İL	GBM ADI	GBM MEVCUDU	TOPLAM MEVCUT
ŞANLIURFA (3)	Ceylanpınar	533	11.089
	Harran	9.506	
	Suruç	1.050	
ADANA (1)	Sarıçam	27.134	27.134
KİLİS (2)	Öncüpınar	4.225	14.750
	Elbeyli	10.525	
KAHRAMANMARAŞ(1)	Merkez	14.029	14.029
HATAY (3)	Altınözü	7.801	16.476
	Yayladağı	4.335	
	Apaydın	4.340	
OSMANİYE (1)	Cevdetiye	14.046	14.046
MALATYA (1)	Beydağı	8.584	8.584
GAZİANTEP (1)	Nizip 2	3.618	3.618
Toplam		109.726	
GEÇİCİ BARINMA MERKEZLERİ DIŞINDA BULUNAN SURİYELİ SAYISI		3.504.382	

As can be seen in Table 6 above, Adana has the highest population of Syrian people living in one camp with 27,134 total persons of concern in June 13th, 2019. Hatay follows Adana with 16,476 people in three different camps, and Kilis is the third city in line with 14,750 total number of refugees in two different camps. The camps are now under the control of DGMM unlike the previous years when they were run by AFAD. It is expected that all camps will be closed in the coming year. It is important to note that the official data display the number of registered Syrian population in Turkey. Yet, if unregistered ones are included in the data the numbers would be much higher.

The following Chapter will introduce LGBTI rights' movement in Turkey and social interactions between gay NGOs in Istanbul and Syrian gay men under temporary protection after 2011.

CHAPTER 3: MIGRATION AND LGBTI PEOPLE

In this chapter, I will discuss LGBTI movement in Turkey and LGBTI life, particularly in Istanbul and how Syrian gay men has become a part of this scene in time. I will also dwell on the media coverage of Syrian LGBTI people and cover literature on LGBTI refugees in different parts of the world concerning the legal and social aspects of the issue. In the first section of chapter, I will briefly mention LGBTI rights movement's history in Turkey. In the second section, I will focus on media coverage on refugees and LGBTI refugees, in particular, in Turkey who are mostly Syrian and illuminate mainstream media's view towards those refugees. In the third and the last section of this chapter, I will investigate queer migration literature and the ways that literature deals with problems related to queer migration phenomenon. Overall, this chapter is tailored in a way to see the greater context in which Syrian gay men try to survive and come up with different strategies to live their sexual identity (gay) under the legal status (temporary protection) and ethnic identity (Syrian Arabs) in Turkey.

As migration and migration related issues have started become overwhelmingly global and their effects began to be felt by many people in different parts of the world, topics related to migration attracted attention from a wide range of international community. Since Turkey hosts the highest number of different refugee populations, mainstream media in Turkey has become increasingly interested in the topic. Thus, currently there are lots of news articles and

discussion programs on TVs that are dealing with migration issues and, in a good or bad way, shape the idea on immigrants/refugees in society.

Aside from migration, LGBTI rights movement is another rising topic in the Turkish society. As will be explained in the next section, an organized LGBTI movement and its active participation to social mobility made the movement become popular and well-known by political actors. Also, this popularity made the movement gain media attention. When these two popular issues get together, they make sensational focus in the mainstream media.

3.1. The LGBTI Rights Movement in Turkey

Neither under the rule of the Ottoman Empire nor the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, homosexuality and transsexuality had been forbidden and criminalized. But, we can say that homosexuality and transsexuality was always refrained and even ridiculed in the public sphere. In other words, homosexuals and transsexuals in Turkey lived relatively in peace compared to their European and North American counterparts. As a consequence of this relatively peaceful conditions, LGBTI – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and intersex – movement's history in Turkey is shorter compared to the movement's European and North American counterparts. The first homophile organizations in the United States were founded at the beginning of the 1950s and other local, state-based, and national organizations followed Los Angeles based first organization, called Mattachine Society (D'Emilio, 2002: 169). In the Turkish case, however, we see the very first steps of this particular political movement much later. The second half of the 1980s is the years that the first initiatives for an organized homophile movement was taken (Erol, 2011). Back in the second half of the 1980s, the first initiators of the homophile movement named the movement as Homosexual Liberation Movement (Eşcinsel Kurtuluş Hareketi) was established in Ankara and the movement based their aims primarily on the liberation of gay men and lesbians in Turkey. This preference of movement's depending its basis on gay men and lesbians can be obviously understood by the

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name of one of the first homophile organizations, Kaos GL. Letters G and L refer to gay men and lesbians who are the primary target group of this liberation movement in Turkey.

Throughout the 1990s, LGBTI organizations in Turkey started to have a voice in the political arena, shaping their own political agendas, and giving the will to direct movement without intervention from other political organizations. For this particular era of the movement, it can be said that the movement partially acquired its liberation from the media in an effort to correct certain expressions while upgrading its main objectives by using a human rights discourse. LGBTI movement, in this era, was reconciled with transsexuality and bisexuality and started to struggle towards achieving equal rights for everyone under the umbrella term of LGBTI. The millennial age helped LGBTI movement to become stronger gradually, and the movement had much more experience and support than it had in the former era (Engindeniz-Şahan, 2014). This new era also came with a new government which describes itself conservative. It seems discouraging for a movement which resists against conservative sexual norms and gender identities to carry out its struggle in a country under the administration of a conservative government. Despite the fact that the President of Turkey and the leader of AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, talked about LGBTI rights in a discussion program, called *Genç Bakış*, in Channel D in 2002 and told that "It is necessary that homosexuals too should be protected before law within the scope of their own rights and freedoms"[14] , there has been no attempts from the government so far to include LGBTI rights in the Constitution after fifteen years of their coming to power. It is not surprising to hear such a supportive declaration from Erdoğan, not because only of his populist discourse before he was elected, but also of previous supports of LGBTI movement to the movement from which Erdoğan rose. Kaos GL, the first LGBTI organization in Turkey, had showed solidarity with students who had not been allowed to get in universities because of their headscarves. Before Erdoğan's election, some LGBTI activists were giving speeches in panels focusing on

discrimination and human rights with the activists of conservative MAZLUMDER (Yılmaz, 2014: 13). Thus, conservative activists and politicians were actually recognizing the LGBTI movement, but when a conservative government became elected, this recognition turned into "exclusion by recognition" (Yılmaz, 2014: 13).

One of the main indicators of the increasing support for LGBTI movement is the Pride March. The first Pride March was held in 2005 with only a limited number of people. Their numbers increased every year, and it has reached over fifty thousand in 2013. In 2014, number of participants to the march was nearly the same. For the last four consecutive years, however, the Pride March was banned in Turkey on the grounds that it poses a security challenge in the country.

After Gezi Movement in Turkey, political parties in opposition, especially BDP, CHP, and HDP, showed more interest in LGBTI people and their problems. This is the cornerstone of openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual citizens to run campaigns for seats in municipality councils. Their campaigns for municipality councils intersected with the time of preparations for the new constitution in Turkey as of 2011. LGBTI movement could not achieve to make LGBTI rights included in the new Constitution, however, it "succeeded in extending its political alliance with the left side of the political spectrum. As a result of the deepening collaboration between the BDP of the Kurdish movement and the LGBT rights movement, BDP representatives openly voiced the demands of the LGBT rights movement, and called for the recognition of LGBT individuals as equal citizens. The LGBT rights movement managed to broaden its political alliance that now includes the center-left CHP, which is currently the largest opposition party in the Parliament. Hence CHP's supportive stance toward LGBT equality prevented the marginalization of the demands of LGBT rights movement during the new constitution making process (Yılmaz, 2013: 139). Despite of the support gained from left-wing parties, failure of including LGBT rights in the new

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Constitution shifted "starting point of the movement's political strategy into imagining and articulating a political community that includes LGBTs as equal citizens" (Birdal, 2013: 129).

Running campaigns for municipality councils after Gezi Resistance with the support of BDP, CHP, and HDP is the strategy for articulating a political community that includes LGBTs as equal citizens. However, LGBT rights activists using tools of mainstream politics by getting into reel politics bring the question of what if the movement's discourse becomes mainstream. Sezen Yalçın opposes this idea by suggesting that "[this] has nothing to do with movement's discourse getting mainstream, but with imposing LGBTs' demands into the institutions of mainstream politics" (2014: 9). Also, there are two significant points of "openly gay and lesbian candidates and officeholders in the political system. [...] first, although some sentiment exists for the argument that civil rights for lesbian and gays needs to be pursued according to a hierarchy of issues, a more widely shared perspective suggests that all avenues through which progress toward equal status can be pursued. Second, the increase in gay and lesbian officeholders can help alleviate some of the policy disadvantages currently experienced by the gay population" (Herrick and Thomas, 1999: 171).

In the short history of LGBTI movement in Turkey going back thirty years, activists have achieved many goals and gained support from other political organizations, political parties, and ordinary citizens as well. However, we cannot still talk about an equal citizenship and fair treatment in terms of LGBTI rights. In addition to the ongoing inequality and discrimination against Turkish LGBTI people before law, currently Syrian LGBTI people, who fled war and dangerous environment because of their sexual identity and orientation, took refuge in Turkey in order to live in a dignified and secure environment. Some of the Syrian gays became part of the Turkish LGBTI organizations and started to work actively for the protection of Syrian gay and refugee men.

Although Turkey has not recognized LGBTI rights in the Constitution, the situation of LGBTI refugees is neither a new case for the Turkish state nor for the society. Before the Syrian refugee influx, Turkish state had to deal with Iranian, mostly, gay and transsexual refugees. Between 2010 and 2013, it was recorded that there were 537 LGBTI refugee applicants in Turkey, 471 of which are from Iran (Shaksari, 2014: 1000). In 2017, the UNHCR estimates that 1,900 LGBTI refugees are harbored in Turkey.[15] In other words, the number reached at a point which is five times higher than it was four years ago.

3.2. Media Coverage on Syrian LGBTI People in Turkey

As their stay in Turkey gets longer prejudices, negative attitudes, and discrimination against Syrian population in Turkey has been increased. Discriminatory discourse and negative perceptions towards Syrian people on mainstream media plays a triggering role on exclusion of Syrian people from overall society. According to a report published by Hrant Dink Foundation which analyzes Hate Speech in Turkey, both printed and visual media provoked the exclusionary and discriminatory practices against Syrian population in Turkey in 2017.

Hrant Dink Foundation found out that "majority of discourses targeting Syrians contain incorrect and/or incomplete information, decontextualized statements, unfounded claims and distortions" (2018). The report exemplifies those distortions and incomplete information as follows:

> "*Syrians can get into any university without any condition, Syrians can have in vitro fertility procedure free of charge, Syrians receive 1200 TL student grant, Syrians will vote in the upcoming election*" (2018: 112).

While those headlines do not represent the truth, but some rumors that are proved and have no ties with reality, they only serve for creating a duality between two groups, the Syrians and the Turkish citizens, by pumping the idea of "*us*" and "*them*". Separation of two groups as "*us*" and "*them*" shapes society's perception of Syrians and makes them tools for political propaganda, positions them as scapegoats of social and economic regression, and renders them as criminal people (2018: 113).

According to this report, hate discourse against Syrian population in Turkey on Turkish media dramatically increased in 2017. The report suggests "hate speech is not an emotional expression, but an ideological tool used for inciting separation of different groups" (2018: 138). For sure, LGBTI Syrian refugees are not exempt from the effects of hate discourse released by media.

Increasing numbers of LGBTI refugees in the country and also raising awareness on LGBTI rights in Turkey and attracted media attention to the state of LGBTI refugees, especially gay men. One of the most popular mainstream daily newspaper *Milliyet* published a short article on Syrian gay men in Istanbul and the title was *"Istanbul is the paradise of Syrian gay men"*.[16] According to this article, Syrian gay men who have escaped from the torture of radical ISIS militants found a safe place in Turkey and are enjoying a liberal and free life in Istanbul. Another article on an online newspaper called *Internethaber* focused on a gay men's life before and after he fled Syria.[17] In this article, a Syrian gay man, with the pseudonym Daniel Halaby, explicates the ways he was threatened and psychologically affected by ISIS militants. The article also included brutal violent images in which gay men were allegedly thrown away from the roofs by the ISIS militants. While those articles investigate and present Syrian gay men's lives in a binary position, as people fleeing from their oppressive, murderer country and harboring in liberal and savior Turkey, the condition for gay men in Turkey is not as smooth as it is represented in newspapers. In 2016, for

example, a Syrian gay man was raped and murdered in a central district of Istanbul.[18] Syrian gay man, named Muhammed Wisam Sankari, was kidnapped five months before his death, yet managed to escape, and according to his friends the police did not do anything in order to illuminate the case.[19] Friends of Sankari, who are also Syrian nationals, also claimed that they were subject of verbal and physical violence on a daily basis in their neighborhood, Fatih district of Istanbul, because of their sexual identity by both local community and other Syrian refugees. As is mentioned in the newspaper articles, due to lack of information on Turkish legal and medical system among Syrian gay men, they mostly do not report their cases and not reporting violence renders them more vulnerable and more open to threats and abuses. However, we also know that gay Syrians were able to have access to resettlement options in a third country because of their precarious situation.

The only positive image towards Syrian gay men, which does not represent them as passive victims of violence, but instead as arbiters against homophobic and racist violence and also as active participants of LGBTI community in Turkey, is articles on *Mr. Gay Syria* contest.[20] [21] [22] Mr. Gay Syria is a beauty contest for Syrian gay men in Istanbul and it is organized by two Syrian gay men who also escaped from Syria and are living in Istanbul. According to article on BBC Turkish, the reason of organizing such a beauty contest for Syrian gay refugees is to increase the visibility of Syrian gay men and to empower the struggle they pass through. The winner of the contest, Hussein Sabat, states that Syrian gay men are not only bodies that are thrown away from roofs, but more than that. Despite the fact that articles on Mr. Gay Syria contest display a relatively positive aspect of Syrian gay men's lives in Istanbul, they still fail to render those people as miserable and wounded subjects of ISIS and other radical religious organizations in Syria. Even though escalated civil war in Syria drastically and murderously influenced gay men's lives in Syria, life was not more comfortable or easier for most of LGBTI people before civil war.

In 2008, an interview has been published on an online LGBTI magazine, called *kaosgl.org*.[23] In the interview, Mehdi, a Syrian man, talks about gay life in pre-war era of Syria. Throughout the interview, Mehdi mentions that people are taken under custody just because of their gay identity and those men under custody are raped by some police officials. Mehdi also informs that gay men live in the shadows and cannot reveal their romantic relationships out in public in order not to be faced by any violence or physical or verbal abuse. The quotation below explains well what it meant to be a gay in Syria in pre-war era:

> "The pretty things that you lived stay within the confines of four walls and behind the closed doors. At the moment you step outside of the home, you are just two strangers. […] Live in freedom? This is a distant and forbidden sentence for people like us [gays] in here [Syria]."[24]

3.3. Islam, Arab World, and Homosexuality

In 2006, Brian Whitaker, a British journalist, published a book called, *Unspeakable Love: Gay & Lesbian Life in the Middle East*. Through the book, Whitaker tries to illuminate a different aspect of Middle Eastern life – homosexuality. As Whitaker (2006) suggests Islam, which is the dominant religion in the Middle East, and its current relation with homosexuality is shaped more by politics rather than the religion itself. By focusing on multiple Arab countries, including Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia, Whitaker explicates that there is not one Islam, but many regarding religion's interpretation of homosexuality. These multiple ways of conceiving and living Islam are generated through different cultural, social, and historical factors in different countries from Morocco to Indonesia (Whitaker, 2006: 1-5).

Although there are many views on homosexuality in different Islamic interpretations and legal and social sanctions varies from one country to another, the West is eager to see the Muslim Arab world as violent against homosexuals and insistent on not reforming legal enforcements for better conditions for homosexuals. In some respects, it is true that violence,

either social or legal or both, is an integral aspect of Middle Eastern homosexuals' lives. For example, homosexual act is punished by death penalty in Saudi Arabia which utterly implements the Sharia Law. However, as Whitaker suggests, the current rigorist tendencies in the Muslim Arab world towards homosexual are also reaction against what is mostly perceived as contemporary imperialism (2006: 17). In other words, Whitaker claims that acknowledging homosexuality as anti-Islamic or as something against the 'Arab nature' has become a tool of opposing Western values and policies. Those reactionary attitudes against the West even made Islamic scholars and secular Arab leaders allies against homosexuality, which is seen as an import of the West in order to 'vitiate and destroy' the nation. Hence, according to Whitaker politically shaped and regulated social attitudes is the main obstacle for homosexuality and gay rights in the Arab world (2006: 47).

As a consequence of this struggle of the East with the West – which is Islam and the Arab world with the Global North's liberal values in this case – most of gay men live a hidden life behind closed doors and only a small amount of privileged ones can afford to leave their homeland for a Western country where they think they will live happily ever after. Whitaker demonstrates the duality that is experienced by Arab gay men as he tells the story of a Syrian gay man leaving Damascus for London before the civil war.

> "Departure gate, Damascus Airport: a young Arab man in jeans, T-shirt, and latest style of trainers is leaving on a flight to London. He passes through final security checks, puts down his bag, takes something out, and fiddles furtively in a corner. No, he is not preparing to hijack the plane, he is putting rings in his ears. When he arrives in London, the tiny gold rings become a fashion statement that is un-remarkable shocks no one, but back home in Damascus it's different. Arab men, real Arab men, do not wear jewelry in their ears" (2006, 1).

3.4. Queer Migration: Queers on the Way to 'Liberation'

Many gay men under oppression in their home countries because of their sexual orientation tend to see the West as a place where they can live their sexuality freely and be who they are without the fear of persecution and/or harassment. As Brian Whitaker (2006) points out in his book, Western media as well establishes its discourse on migration through the claim that people from oppressive, unmodern countries migrating to liberal, egalitarian, and modern West. That is how the narrative of 'from repression to liberation' occurs and Eithne Luibheid warns us about: "the majority of accounts of queer migration tend to remain organized around a narrative of movement from repression to freedom, or a heroic journey undertaken in search of liberation" (2005: xxv). However, as queer migration literature shows, 'from repression to liberation' narrative does not match with what really queer migrants experience in their newly arrived countries. While queer migrants had to handle and struggle against institutionalized homophobia in their home countries, they start having to deal with institutionalized racism and problems grounded on citizenship, class, and even homophobia in their new countries in Europe or North America.

Queer migration literature mentions two different forms of migration:

(i)   Queer people as (mostly illegal) migrants
(ii)   Queer people as asylum-seekers

Either as illegal migrants or as asylum-seekers what queer people experience on the societal level does not essentially change their situation in the transit and even in destination countries as their struggle may continue as gay men. They are in fact double discriminated: the first one being based on their migrant/refugee identity and the other due to their sexual identity. Yet, they welcome some differences regarding their access to rights and freedoms.

United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951 and 1967 Protocol put the definition of refugee as following:

"[…] the term refugee should apply to any person who: […]

(2) As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." (UNHCR, 2011: 14)

As it is clearly mentioned in the article on the definition of refugee, people who are under threat on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, or a membership of a particular social group in their home country, they might claim asylum from another country. While there is no doubt for ethnic, racial, and/or religious minorities to claim asylum from another country on the basis 'fear of being persecuted', the situation was vague for queer migrants since there is no indication signifying that 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for the reasons of sexual orientation and/or gender identity'.

As Convention does not openly define what 'membership of a particular social group', two approaches have been developed for its interpretation:

"The 'protected characteristic' approach looks to whether the group at issue is united by a characteristic which is immutable or so fundamental to human dignity that [one] should not compelled to forsake it. The 'social perception' approach examines whether the claimed group shares a common characteristic which renders it cognizable or which sets apart from society at large" (ORAM, 2009: 6).

According to UNHCR's *Guidelines on International Protection*[25], the institution adopts both approaches, thus defines 'particular social group' as following:

"[A] particular social group is a group of persons who share a common characteristic other than their risk of being persecuted, or who are perceived as a group by society. The characteristic will often be one which is innate, unchangeable, or which is otherwise fundamental to identity, conscience, or the exercise of one's human rights" UNHCR, 2002: 3).

Thus, queer people may claim asylum under the definition of membership of a particular social group, since "lesbians share the immutable characteristic of being sexually or emotionally attracted to other women; gay men share the immutable characteristic of being sexually or emotionally attracted to other men. These characteristics are regarded as so fundamental to identity and human dignity that one should not be forced to forsake them" (ORAM, 6). Hence, "for the past two decade many signatories to the United Nation's Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 (Refugee Convention 1951) and the 1967 Protocol have recognized the validity of sexual orientation asylum claims under the category of the 'particular social group'" (Raj, 2016: 1). For example, *Matter of Toboso-Alfonso 20 I.&N. Dec. 819 (BIA 1990)* in 1990 is the first incident in the US which "established the precedent that sexual orientation could constitute a valid social group" (Raj, 2). The Australia followed the US in 1992 with the case of *Morato v. Minister for Immigration, Local Government, and Ethnic Affairs*. United Kingdom has acknowledged queer minorities as a particular social group as late as 1999 (Raj, 2).

There is also another migratory phenomenon that the experiences of queer migrants illuminate, which has been called as 'sexual migration' (Carrillo, 2004: 59). Carrillo uses the term as a reference "to international migration that is motivated, fully or partially, by the sexuality of those who migrate, including motivations connected to sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-definitions of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from experiences of discrimination

or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for greater sexual equality and rights"
(59). Sexual migration for Carrillo is not caused necessarily by economic, political, or familial
factors, but mostly stems from contemporary global sexualities. The digital age made access
to information easier than it has ever been before. Each and every idea on any issue is
wandering around the world and it is open to access, including information and thoughts on
sexualities. That is to say that, considering homosexuality, people are aware of the fact that in
some parts of the world being gay is not a problem. Thus, even if people do not feel a life
threatening danger in their home country, they do migrate to feel freer and more empowered
in terms of their sexuality.

While contemporary global sexualities causes sexual migration, it is also influenced by
the effect of this kind of migration. Carrillo suggests that "[a] more common approach in the
current literature on this topic [sexual migration] is to attend to changes in immigrants'
sexuality that result from international relocation. […] Also paying attention to the role that
sexuality itself plays as a force propelling transnational movement may yield interesting new
insight about the constitution of contemporary global sexualities" (59). In other words, as
sexual migrants arrives in the country, they do bring their own cultural codes and dispositions
with them which changes and reshapes the ideas regarding sexualities. Also, because sexual
migrants are not bounded in their arrival countries, but might prefer going back to their home
countries, they involuntarily become establishers and ambassadors of contemporary global
sexualities. Not being limited to borders and legal sanctions is the feature that differentiates
sexual migrants from queer refugees.

As 'sexual' migrants do not have to prove or tell their sexuality to anyone in order not
to be deported from their arrival country, queer refugees have to tell and prove their
homosexuality when they arrive in the country. For David Murray (2011), a queer asylum-
seeker learns to be a refugee when he or she migrates to a new land. Since queer refugees

have to talk about and prove their sexualities, they should also be competent individuals who have the potential to learn 'becoming a refugee' in order to be granted asylum. Murray focuses on the ways "the refugee claimant comes to understand the meaning of the episteme and [migration] system, and in so doing learns to become a becoming LGBT refugee" (2011: 129). Becoming an LGBT refugee puts this particular individual in a special place in society. Because this place is determined by both sexuality, queerness, and by social position, being a refugee, learning becoming a refugee essentially is claiming a socio-sexual identity. "However, for the sexual minority refugee, this process of learning is intensified through migration into a hyper-visible moment of state scrutiny. There are five distinct moments or spaces in the life of a sexual minority refugee in which they voluntarily or involuntarily learn about, confront, reflect, and/or claim a particular socio-sexual identity" (2011: 129).

The first two 'moments/spaces of learning' are very close to one another. As Murray describes:

"[I]n their country of origin, they learn, as children and young adults, about 'queerness' in a local context, that is, how sexual diversity is viewed evaluated, rewarded or penalized in their home town, city and country. For those who grow up in urban areas, and/or who have access to electronic communications technologies that provide access to 'foreign content', such as international films, videos, and other media, and the internet, or for those who live in areas where people from 'outside' nations or cultures come to visit, work or live, there is often a second space or moment of learning, in which they read about, encounter, or see images of people who engage in similar sexual activities, but who look, sound and behave differently and utilize a language that makes different associations between those similar sexual practices and identity formations" (2011: 129).

In other words, being an LGBT refugee starts with learning being an LGBT through digital and cultural capitals and this process starts at the home country. The second moment/space is related with the realization of similarities among differences whether it be cultural or social. Through the second space/moment, that particular individual sees that there are different ways and forms of experiencing life with a queer identity. That is the time when that particular individual decides to move on.

"The third moment/space of learning for a sexual minority refugee begins just after they arrive at […] airport or enter the offices of the Citizenship and Immigration Canada in suburban Toronto [for the refugees who arrive in Canada] and submit their application for refugee status. From this moment on, the individual must learn about 'becoming a becoming' LGBT refugee as I outlined above. This is perhaps the most hyper-visible, self-conscious and deliberative period due to the refugee's tenuous position in a system in which the state now scrutinizes their past sexual behavior in order to assess whether that behavior fits a particular definition of sexual identity, and if so, whether that sexual identity is subject to persecution in the individual's country of origin. The fourth moment/space of learning often occurs simultaneously alongside the third; this is the process of learning about how sexual diversity is organized, named and located in their new surroundings. […] The fifth and final moment/space occurs after a successful hearing, in which the now 'official' convention refugee can begin to apply for permanent resident status in [the new country], and can make plans for their future envisioning themselves as a potentially full citizen without fear of deportation" (2011: 129).

Thus, becoming a sexual minority necessitates a long process in which learning and adaptation to new forms, ideas, and norms are included.

While queer refugees try to learn becoming a queer refugee, they also have to face with social barriers, including departure, community isolation, and legal barriers (Randazzo,

2005, 38). The first social barrier is *departure* which starts all the process. Even if people are afraid of persecution in their home country and suffering from systemic violence and abuses, leaving the family, the loved ones, friends, and/or accustomed places is tough. Obtaining passport and necessary documents might set some barriers and also, even leaving country illegally "requires at least some resources in order to secure transportation out of the country" (2005: 38). Hence, departure is not an easy process both psychologically and economically.

Community isolation is another important social barrier for queer refugees. "Those who do manage to escape persecution in their home countries do not necessarily find liberation after arrival in the [new country]. Because of language and cultural barriers, many immigrants join ethnic communities composed of people from their own country of origin" (2005: 39). According to Randazzo, those ethnic communities mostly turns out to be homophobic and transphobic as much as the society back in homeland. Homophobic and transphobic attitudes and thoughts in ethnic communities render queer refugees hide their sexual identity and live a secret life as they were doing back in home. It is even harder for queer refugees who come across a homophobic/transphobic person from the community as an interpreter for their asylum hearings. This time they straddle whether to disclose their sexuality, which is the main reason they claim asylum for, or to continue keeping their sexuality as a secret. Mostly, as Randazzo suggests, "a gay immigrant is unlikely to reveal his or her sexuality" (40). Even those queer refugees ignore their ethnic communities and turn to LGBT community, it is probable for them not to find support networks, but instead racism and xenophobia. Thus, even if there are some support and advocacy networks for queer refugees, they might not know about them because of community isolation both from their ethnic communities and local LGBT community.

Legal barriers are as equally compelling as the previous social barriers. "Immigrants who do manage to apply for asylum face a number of legal barriers, including a bureaucracy

that is difficult to navigate without an attorney, gender-related legal obstacles, and cultural and legal barriers to proving one's sexual orientation" (42). Cultural connotations related to homosexuality are mostly different in the immigrants' home countries and those connotation might not fit in and correspond expectations on how a homosexual should be in the new country. While this misfit between the expectations and reality complicates queer immigrant's asylum case, having limited sources to have an attorney stalemates individuals. Having an attorney is especially important for immigrants for their asylum cases, because, as previously mentioned, attorneys are the most important mediator for the immigrants to learn becoming refugee. "LGBT refugee claimants face daunting challenges negotiating a system in which questions of authenticity are constructed through an evaluation of bodily appearances, comportment, and narratives that are consistently evaluated for their fit with western homonationalist sexual categories" (Murray, 2014: 29). Without the help of an attorney, embracing the expectations of 'western homonationalist sexual categories' would be more difficult for queer immigrants.

For queer refugees in Turkey, legal system is relatively more complex. Because Turkey does only grant asylum to the persons who are originating in Europe, many refugees, including queer ones, are not allowed to stay in Turkey for their life time, yet are allowed to stay until their asylum application process is done. "Refugee status determination in Turkey is an arduous process, which usually lasts many months, and often takes years. The Turkish asylum system consists of two parallel "tracks." The first, applying to domestic authorities for Turkish asylum status, is mandatory for all asylum seekers regardless of their country of origin. The second, applying to the UNHCR for refugee status, is applicable to all non-Europeans who seek third country resettlement. Non-Europeans must pursue both "tracks" simultaneously" (ORAM, 2009: 2). During processing of their asylum case, applicants should

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live in one of approximately 50 pre-designated satellite cities, which are mostly located in country's interior.

During the processing of application, applicants have access to limited social, medical, and legal services. Also, queer refugees are exposed to physical and verbal violence by both local community members and other refugees. In addition to threats to refugees' physical safety, they also have problems "accessing housing, employment, social assistance, and education" (8), as ORAM[26] reports in the report *Unsafe Haven: The Security Challenges Facing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Asylum Seekers & Refugees in Turkey* which focuses on Iranian queer refugees. Those refugees also suffer from "deep feelings of isolation and depression while waiting for their refugee claims to be evaluated" (8).

ORAM's report on Iranian queer refugees in Turkey proves that being both a queer and a refugee puts them in a position of "double marginality" (Randazzo, 2005: 38). One interviewee in the report clearly states queer refugees' situation:

"All refugees have problems in Turkey. However, I believe that some problems are very unique to our situation. Many LGBT refugees have no one to turn to. Refugees who fled their countries because of their political activism often can turn to their political parties for support. Refugees who fled for religious reasons can turn to their religious communities. Some refugees can turn to their families in their home country for support. Many of us left everything behind. We have been cut off from our communities, our families in our countries and have no one to turn to" (ORAM, 2009: 22).

While Iranian refugees still have to live one of the satellite cities until their application decision is made, Syrian refugees can live either in camps or in cities. Thus, most of Syrian queer refugees live in Istanbul, where queer people are most visible and LGBTI life is more dynamic. Yet, that does not mean that Syrian queer people in Istanbul are exempt from

'double marginality' and problems related to access to legal services, health services, and work. Thus, there are considerable amount of Syrian refugees, whether gay man or straight woman, who engaged with sex work (Ördek, 2017). According to the report prepared by Kemal Ördek from Red Umbrella Sexual Health and Human Rights Association, Syrian people who are in sex work are engaging in this sector due to many reasons, such as:

(i)   Free will necessitated by basic needs
(ii)   Human trafficking

As the aforementioned report illuminates, Syrian sex workers have chosen to work in this sector, because they needed to support their family. Since they have problems finding job due to several reasons including language barrier, racism, and hard working conditions, they prefer engaging with sex work which offers higher wage and flexible working hours (2017: 32).

CHAPTER 4: SYRIAN GAY MEN IN ISTANBUL

In this chapter, I am going to profile the participants of the research and also talk about my observations on tea and talk sessions during which Syrian gay men socialized and shared their experiences and emotions. This chapter is important to understand those men's everyday life experiences in Syria and in Turkey and focusing on their lives, coming-out stories, migration journey, their new experiences in the new cultural and social environment(s) and future expectations and aspirations.

The participants in this research are seven Syrian gay men who are either still living or used to live in Istanbul between 2013 and 2019, aged between 21 and 40 years old. All seven men self-identified as gay. Three of men were under temporary protection in Turkey and their

asylum file was under process of resettlement to a third country during the interviews. One of them was already resettled in Norway. Two of them were not under temporary protection, instead had tourist visas. The last one was not sure if he should apply for resettlement at the time of the interview. For the purpose of keeping their identities safe in accordance with the Koç University ethics committee requirements, I will use pseudonyms instead of their real names.

4.1. Profiling the Participants

Tarek is 29 years old gay man originating from Damascus. He is ethnically Arab. While his family's religious practice and belief is Sunni Islam, Tarek does not believe in any religion. Instead, he considers himself as a believer in God and calls his belief as "general faith". Tarek has two brothers and one younger sister back home. He is alone in Istanbul while all his family members still live in Damascus in relative safety. He has a bachelor degree in Computer Engineering and following his graduation, he worked as a network administrator in a bank for four years.

Tarek had to make a quick decision at one point after civil war erupted. He either had to attend compulsory military service and enroll for the Syrian military or come to Turkey. He opted for the second choice, because he did not want to fight against his countrymen. He arrived in Turkey by plane in January 2016 and he did not need visa because back in that time Turkey did not require visa for Syrian citizens. He told me:

"I would not go to military in any case even if there was no civil war in Syria. I am against using guns – no matter what."

Tarek has come out to his family regarding his sexual orientation and they are very supportive both emotionally and financially. He always felt at ease with respect to his sexuality. This is no different in Turkey. Since he is from a well-off family, he does not face

any economic difficulties in Turkey. He lives in Beşiktaş in a middle and/or upper-middle class neighborhood, together with his Turkish partner in a flat that he owns. Tarek does not think about applying for temporary protection or resettlement in a third country. But he tries hard to establish his future in Turkey, as he lost all his hope of going back to Syria. At the time of the interview, he was searching for a job. Months later when I contacted him again, he told me that he was working in an NGO which focus on humanitarian aid with a particular emphasis on refugees. Tarek is a sociable person with lots of international friends and enjoys Istanbul's lively night life. What distinguishes Tarek from others – other than his socio-economic status and his comfortability with sexual orientation – was that he does not consider himself as a refugee, but as an immigrant instead. As he is not dependent on any financial aid, it gives him 'more freedom', he says, without any expectation from the UNHCR or any other civil society organization – be it international, Syrian or Turkish. That's also why he tries to establish a life in Istanbul. He sees himself as an Istanbulite already. He claims he cannot live anywhere else in Turkey but Istanbul.

Zaid is a 21 years old gay man originating from Latakia. He is from an Arab Alawite family, however he does not practice any religion. He was studying civil engineering in Latakia, but he could not finish his studies because he left the country. He is the only son of his family, and he has one sister. His family still lives in Latakia. According to the Syrian law, he did not have to attend compulsory military service because he is the only son of his family. Thus, his reason to leave Syria was not compulsory military service, but something different. As he explains his reasons in his own words:

> "I cannot live there [in Syria] anymore. Latakia's situation is too bad and it's getting worse day by day. Life is not easy there. Money is not enough, there is not enough food. No normal life. And I want to live a normal gay life in Europe. […] Actually, besides all, my first reason to leave Syria is I am gay."

As he puts forward clearly, the living conditions for any human being has become difficult in Syria. Plus, he wants to live his gay identity freely, which is definitely not the case back home. He sets his mind going to Europe instead of staying in Turkey. Zaid has feminine manners and he did not feel comfortable himself in terms of his sexual orientation and he did not come out to his family yet. However, he thinks that his family somehow has felt that he is gay and that's why they initially supported him to leave the country. Zaid arrived in Turkey in June 2017, however he left Syria in March 2017. Before coming to Turkey, he went to Lebanon and spent two months in Beirut and one month in Tripoli. In order to come to Turkey, he paid a lot of money to human smugglers and he was brought to Turkey through Iran. Zaid registered to the UNHCR in order to be resettled in a third country. He prefers to be resettled in Germany because he has already some friends there.

Zaid is still not comfortable with his sexual identity, especially coming out to his male friends. His words also imply some kind of internal homophobia. For example, when he was talking about gay life in Istanbul, he complained about feminine gay men who "lost their manhood", and he does not want to be seen around with those gay men mainly for the fear of stigmatization.

Nader is 28 years old gay man originating from Homs. He is from a Sunni Muslim family. His family members consider themselves as Arab, however his father is ethnically Turkmen and his mother is ethnically Kurdish. He has two sisters and two brothers. His family members are dispersed all around the Middle East: while two brothers of Nader live in Syria, one is doing his military service under Asad forces and the younger one is living with family. One of his sisters lives in Egypt and the other one is in Jordan.

Nader used to be a devout Muslim when he was much younger. However, at the age of 21, he lost his religious faith. Currently, he identifies himself as an atheist. He was studying tourism and management in Syria, yet he has a complicated education history, since he had to

move through several countries after he left Syria. He lived in Cairo, Jordan, and Turkey respectively. He arrived in Turkey in March 2014 and in March 2016 his resettlement process has been fulfilled and he moved to Norway.

When he was in Istanbul, Nader was a well-known figure among Turkish LGBTI activists. He was one of Syrian LGBTI activists in Istanbul who started organizing "tea and talk" meeting sessions for Syrian queer people in Istanbul. While he was working for a company, and then an NGO for refugees, he had organized several seminars on the LGBTI life in Istanbul. He was also under the spotlight in national and international media for a short time following his resettlement in Norway, because his Syrian boyfriend, with whom he met in Istanbul, has also resettled in Norway after Nader's resettlement.[27] Yet, he had to pay a high price due to media attention. His hidden gay identity was made public and this was how his family found that that he was gay. Nader did not talk to his family almost for one year. However, currently they have started rebuilding their relationship again.

Sami is 23 years old gay man originating from Damascus. He is from a Sunni Muslim family and he is a religious practitioner. He is under temporary protection in Turkey and registered to the UNHCR. His resettlement process is done and accepted to be resettled in a third country. Sami and his family came to Turkey in November 2014. First, they went to Beirut from Damascus by taxi and then they arrived in Turkey by plane. Before coming to Turkey, he was studying engineering, yet he could not finish his studies. He wanted to study in Turkey, but he had to support his family, thus he could not continue his education in Turkey. Sami has one brother and 2 sisters. All his siblings are now located in Germany. Sami lives with his parents in Fatih and works part-time both in an NGO and in a hotel. Sami is currently waiting for the French Embassy to call him for an interview to be resettled in France. Sami is shy and only very recently came out as gay. He has always been aware of the fact that he is gay, but he did not confess this reality even to himself until last year. When he

finally came out, he decided to leave Turkey for France in order to have a "happy and successful life as a gay man". Yet, his parents still do not know about his sexual orientation. This is an information he shared with two of his Syrian gay friends and with me.

Mike is 23 years old gay man originating from Aleppo. He is from a Rum Orthodox family. He is not a religious practitioner. Mike studied computer science which is a two-year program, and he finished his studies before coming to Turkey. Before his arrival, he was teaching English. At the time of our interview, Mike was under temporary protection in Turkey and he was waiting for his last interview with the Dutch Embassy in Turkey for his resettlement to the Netherlands. After two months of the interview with Mike, he resettled in the Netherlands as a refugee and currently he lives in the Netherlands. When he was in Istanbul, he was living in Şirinevler with his Syrian gay friend. He had some far relatives in Hatay, the southern and border city of Turkey with Syria, with whom he is not in touch. Turkey and especially Istanbul was his dream place to live when he was a child. Before leaving Syria, he had to options: Turkey or Lebanon. He preferred Turkey as explained eloquently in his words:

> "I came to Turkey because it was my childhood dream to visit Turkey. Yet, I have never thought of coming under these circumstances. I also thought that it [Turkey] is better than Lebanon. The situation there [in Lebanon] is not good. The situation is the same with Syria except the fact that there is an ongoing war in Syria. In addition to that, everything is expensive, you can't find a place to live."

Before coming to Turkey, he went to Beirut from Damascus by car. He didn't stay long in Beirut, instead took a ferry from Beirut to Istanbul. He arrived in Turkey in November 2015. He was working part-time as a receptionist in a hotel hosting Arab guests and also in an NGO focusing on humanitarian aid for immigrants and refugees. Mike's family still lives in Aleppo and they do not know about his sexual orientation. According to Mike, his mother

somehow feels that he is gay, but they did not talk about it at all. Mike is proud of his sexuality, yet he does not prefer talking about his sexuality openly when there are straight people around. When I last saw him before he left Turkey for the Netherlands, he was sad to live Turkey, yet excited about his brand new life in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Adel is 35 years old gay man originating from Damascus. He is from a Sunni Muslim family. I made an interview with him during Ramadan, and he was fasting as Islam orders fasting during Ramadan. Adel studied sociology in Syria and was working in the Human Resources Department in a Syrian company. He arrived in Turkey in February 2015. He first went to Beirut from Damascus by car and took a plane to Istanbul from Beirut. At the time of his entry, he didn't need a visa for Turkey. However, the Turkish state changed the policy since then and required Syrian citizens to hold a visa for Turkey in order to enter the country as of January 2016. All his family lives in Damascus, which, as Adel claims, is a relatively safe space.

Adel is under temporary protection in Turkey. He lives in Osmanbey in a shared flat with another Syrian gay man. He is out to most of his friends and he came out only to his mother back in Syria. Her reaction was neutral, however they did not talk about this issue at all after he came out. He worked in the ICMC as an Arabic-English interpreter. At the time of our interview, he was doing part-time job as an interpreter in an LGBTI association in Istanbul. He was planning to register to UNHCR in order to be resettled in a third country. Currently, he is working in an NGO in Istanbul which is focusing on refugees' and immigrants' livelihood in Turkey. The last time I talked to him he told me that he decided not to register to UNHCR for resettlement, because he is happy with his job and do not want to leave Istanbul. Adel is a sociable person who likes to make new friends and spend time with his friends, yet he does not like to participate in the gay entertainment scene (clubs, pubs,

parties, etc.) of Istanbul. He generally prefers staying at home in the evenings and invite his friends (gay and/or straight) over to his place.

Ayman is a 40 years old gay man originating from Damascus. He is from an Assyrian Orthodox family. When I first met Ayman, he was a PhD candidate at a university in Beirut and he obtained his degree by early 2018. He is a lawyer and he was working in his family's law office when he was in Syria. Ayman has a residence permit in Turkey and he does not need to hold temporary protection. He is occasionally going to Beirut for his graduate study, but he is mainly based in Istanbul. Since he has a residence permit rather than temporary protection status assigned to Syrian refugees, it is not a problem for him to go to Lebanon and come back to Turkey. He came to Turkey from Beirut in February 2016 by plane after he has finished his coursework at one of the universities in Beirut. He is living in Şişli, with his own words, "with 21 Turkish cats and 1 Syrian cat".

Although Ayman is out to his whole family, they never did accept his sexual orientation. Yet, this reaction did not stop him to become a gay rights activist in Lebanon. Obviously, after he decided to become an LGBTI activist, everybody in Lebanon and Syria knew that he was gay. Ayman is project coordinator at an LGBTI organization in Istanbul and he is responsible for the service to LGBTI refugees who are coming to this NGO in order to get help. He is organizing tea and talk sessions for Syrian gay refugees each week and knows their life stories by heart. Since he is always taking care of the participants of tea and talk sessions and protective towards them, those participants call him "Mama" as an implication of fidelity and family-like attachment towards him. Ayman is also working as a consultant for a Gulf country government in the process of the constitutional change in the country. In addition to that, his PhD project is fully funded, thus he gets money from this funding agency and does not need to find a job to make a living in Istanbul. Ayman is happy to be in Istanbul,

yet he plans to go back to Syria when the war is ended where he can concentrate on gay rights in his home country.

4.2. Tea and Talk Sessions: A Safe Space to be Gay

Alongside the face-to-face interviews, I also attended tea and talk sessions regularly as a participant observer. Two of the sessions that I participated was during Ramadan, and the last three of them was after Ramadan. During the Ramadan month, the sessions started at 8 pm due to *iftar* time. Apart from the Ramadan month, the sessions usually start at 5 pm and continue until 8 pm at night.

Tea and talk sessions have been organized since 2014. It was initiated by a couple of Syrian gay men who were aware of queer refugees' fragile conditions and aimed to provide social and psychological help and support to queer refugees in need. Firstly, the group started their sessions in the office of a Turkish LGBTI organization called Lambda Istanbul. However, Lambda Istanbul had to close its office down due to financial difficulties. Thus, the group started meeting in another LGBTI organization in SPoD's office. They are still meeting there in Şişli and hold weekly sessions in that particular office.

As tea and talk sessions were not funded, it was mainly up to the participants themselves who somehow managed to keep their meetings continue. It is a very fluid environment with people come and go. In September 2016, the group established a fund-raising campaign in order to get money to cover the basic needs of these sessions. They made a video call for their campaign in Arabic with English subtitles. They declare their campaign as follows:

> "LGBTI Syrians are persecuted by all sides of the Syrian conflict. But nothing has
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> done to help us reach safety. In Istanbul, we started weekly meetings for Arab LGBTI
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> refugees. We called them "Tea and Talk". It became a safe place for us to discuss our

needs. Through "Tea and Talk", we managed to become an Arab LGBTI community, most of which are Syrians. We went on Istanbul Pride together. But the situation in Turkey is deteriorated. We became a target to homophobic attacks. Despite it all, we took part in Mr. Gay Syria competition in Istanbul. But when [the winner] had the title, [he] could not get a visa to represent Syria in the international competition [in Malta]. All [we] wanted was to tell the world about our problems here as LGBTI refugees. For example, I was a victim of homophobic attack in Istanbul, but the police didn't allow me to report it. Only SPoD is helping us. Without their help, we wouldn't have continued our meetings. We are facing many challenges and we are always in need of support. But SPoD and other Turkish LGBTI organizations can't find enough funds to support our work. We need to sustain our safe place to be able to support and empower one another. By donating, you will be protecting lives."[28]

Tea and Talk sessions did not only create a safe space for queer refugees, but also helped an organized queer refugee community to be established in Istanbul. In addition to the safe space the sessions provide for the participants in order to socialize with each other in a friendly atmosphere away from the judging eyes, these get-togethers also serve as a tool for gaining information on employment, education, health-related issues, housing, and resettlement in a third country.

Ayman, current coordinator of Tea and Talk sessions, describes the meetings as follows:

"We have tea and talk meetings in SPoD. It has started two and a half years ago. When I came to Turkey, I started coming to organization [SPoD]. We share information regarding healthcare. We help Syrian people in need of help. For example, we offer legal advice, or find a flat to share. Or, financial help. For example, one comes and says he is in a financially bad condition and we ask everybody in the group that who can give 5 liras. We collect those 5 liras and give it to this person in need of help.

People might ask for job, they might ask something about the healthcare, or sometimes they ask things related to migration to be resettled somewhere else. Or they just come to talk and share their experiences. We try to provide them any kind of help."

When I attended the sessions as a participant observer, one of the participants, most of the time Ayman, translated me the conversation. The range of the topics discussed is quite wide. For example, they might be talking about their one-night-stand lover or share their interesting and/or funny moments in their daily lives. At other times, they might be discussing the ways a queer refugee applicant should talk and explain his story during the resettlement interview with an UNHCR official. In one of the sessions I attended, one participant told that his resettlement file was approved by the Netherlands and he thanked everybody for their continuous support. After this session, the participants collected money among them and bought cake and drinks to celebrate their friend's successful result. While they were talking about his dreams about and expectation from the Netherlands, the dominant mood in the room was pure joy and excitement. These success stories also elevate the otherwise gloomy mood of the participants and raise expectations and hopes for their future.

Two sessions that I attended during Ramadan month was relatively different from the regular sessions. Regardless of their religious affiliation, the participants were gathering in SPoD office around *iftar* time. Before they start eating, the participants were talking about what they have done during the week and exchanging the last gossips in their community. While they were waiting for call to prayer (*ezan*) in order to break their fast, those who were not fasting were drinking coffee and tea. Everyone attending however, either fasting or not, were helping to set the table for dinner. Those fasting and those who are not fasting were almost equal in numbers. It is interesting though neither the fasting participants nor non-

fasting ones did not talk about religion at all. When I asked one of the fasting participants about his religious faith and his homosexuality, he answered:

"I used to fast every Ramadan back in Syria. Although my family is not a conservative, they try to follow Islam's order as much as they can. So, yes, I used to fast and now I fast in Turkey, too. I'm not quite sure about how I should think about religion and Islam's attitude towards homosexuality. So, I prefer better not think about it. Fasting is a ritual for me that I cannot give up easily. It is encoded in my culture. Also, it makes me feel better. What I need in Turkey as a refugee is feeling better. So, yes, I want to feel better and I fast."

After *iftar* dinner, everybody was helping each other to clear the table and when they are done with doing the tidying, they were cooking Syrian coffee. Perhaps this is one of the most important rituals. While they were sipping the coffee, one of the participants were turning an Arabic belly dance music on and some of them were doing belly dance in a very feminine way.

Although everybody is considered equal and helps each other without labelling as feminine and/or masculine or as bottom and/or top while they were setting and clearing the table, entertainment scene of these sessions have some very strict boundaries in terms of masculinity/femininity. One's masculine or feminine manner determines his sexual role as top or bottom and that is the only role for participants. While one of the feminine participants were doing belly dance in the center of the room, Adel, who has a masculine manner and was sitting next to me and sipping his coffee, told me:

"You see him. He is a bottom. There is no way a top (gay man) would dance this way. I don't like it when gay men do that kind of girly stuff. It is not appropriate for men dancing like this. If you are a man, be a man. You don't have to be girly if you are gay."

It was quite surprising for me that Adel, who is always caring about people and trying to help everybody who are in need, talking this way. When I asked him how he could identify if one is bottom or top, he answered me as:

"He is bottom, can't you see? Can you imagine a top dancing like this [in a very feminine way]? That is how women should behave, not a man. That's not how they feel. They just think that they should act like this [in a feminine way] in order to hunt tops."

When I asked Tarek, another masculine-mannered participant and was sitting next to me at that time, if he is agreeing with Adel, he told me:

"I agree with him one hundred percent. If we were back in Syria, I would never ever be in the same place with those kind of people [more feminine gay men]. They have different ideas on being gay. But I'm here now, because I have to. I attend those sessions because I think I should help them and support them psychologically."

This conversation drew my attention, and I came up with this topic in our one-to-one interview with Tarek. Because both Tarek and Adel are from Damascus, which is the capital and metropolitan city of Syria, I asked him:

" […]

Kerem: So, you told me that you represent the young generation of people of Damascus. What about the other cities? Would you be friends with other gay people, for example a gay man from a small town?

Tarek: Well, it doesn't matter for me if a person is from a small town or a big city. I prefer having a person in my life as a friend who is educated and open-minded. However, it is not much possible for a person from a small town to share the same mentality with me. I need someone with the same mentality with me to get along with him. For example, those people in SPoD [in tea and talk sessions]… I would never

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hang out with them in Syria. They neither share the same mentality nor have the same cultural background with me. I do not hang out with them in Turkey, too. It's just in SPoD that we are together. Also, because of their lack of information on homosexuality, they think they should be feminine in order to be gay."

Masculinity and femininity is an issue among the participants of tea and talk sessions. There are strict boundaries between masculine and feminine gay men and those who are more masculine than the other criticizes the feminine ones. While Tarek and Adel identifies the feminine gay men as bottoms, they do not do that without a reason. When I talked to one of the participants who has feminine manners and also the one who is the most willing to do belly dance, he defined his future partner as:

"The participant: Oh, my *zawj*[29] should be a strong man who can protect me. He should care about me, look after me. I want him to work and come in the evening while I cook for him. I want my *zawj* to take me out in the night, and everybody should look at him because he is a great man with strong arms. And he should be jealous of me when there are other tops around.

Kerem: So, how do you identify your sexual orientation? As gay?

The participant: *Habibi*[30], I am bottom."

As can be seen, these Syrian gay men with feminine manners embrace features which are socially and culturally attributed to the women in a heterosexual relationship. Also, when I asked him his sexual orientation, he told me his sexual role as an answer.

Language usage is another tool for this strict boundary between masculinity and femininity. People in tea and talk sessions are prone to use the word *inti*[31] when they talk to each other. Adel is strictly against the usage of the word *inti*.

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"They always refer to each other by saying *inti*. It is a word you can use when you talk

to a woman. They sometimes refer me as *inti*. I am sick of it. I am gay, not a woman.

You cannot tell me that, you have to tell me *inte*[32], because I am man. Being gay

doesn't make me woman at all."

Tea and talk sessions is an important setting for Syrian gay men in order to find a safe

space, share their experiences, talk about their problems, and get the necessary information

from other Syrian gay men. Yet, it is not a homogenous environment. Instead, people from

different cities with diverse religious, educational, cultural, and financial backgrounds come

together and they create a queer refugee network, particularly a Syrian gay men network,

where all boundaries vanishes when someone needed help. In the case of solidarity and

helping, Tarek clearly explains his motives and responsibility towards the group:

"Although I do not hang out with those guys in the street and I am their friend here to

a certain minimum extent, since I regularly attend tea and talk sessions. Because we

all have escaped from war. We are here in a different country with a different culture

and environment. So, they might need my help and when they need it, I will do

whatever I can."

4.3. Coming Out of the Closet

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Arab world does not welcome

homosexuality openly. Whitaker (2006) claims that although Islam and its interpretations has

some impact on the attitudes towards homosexuality, when homosexuality was heavily

penalized and scorned under the colonial rule, it also changed the perceptions of Muslims by

developing more negative attitudes against LGBTI. Therefore, gay men regardless of the fact

that they come from secular families or conservative families face serious problems regarding

their sexual orientation.

None of the seven interviewees in this research passed through an easy period while they were accepting their sexuality and coming out of the closet. Although their reasons to migrate to Turkey stems from several dynamics such as financial difficulties, armed conflict in the city, military duty, and so on, being gay is one of the most important factors which made them run away from Syria. Thus, coming out processes of interviewees deserve to be examined as one of the main determining reasons for out-migration. As Adel admits:

> "Coming out is not something very possible in Syria. I mean, I'm talking about my own experience because my family is not that conservative, but also they are not that open-minded about having a gay son. It is not something they would accept easily" (Adel, 35).

Even secular families would not accept gay sons due to cultural reasons – society's expectations from sons and gender norms. Sons are expected to be strong, take care of their family when needed, marry a beautiful young woman and have children – preferably producing more sons for the continuation of the family name. Despite of the fact that Adel thought his family would not accept their son to be gay, he came out to his mother. His mother told him that she somehow felt it, but they did not much talk about this issue later on. In a way, she silently accepted the fact but she is still ashamed about it. She would not share that her son is gay with other members of the extended family let alone with her husband. In fact, even after couple of years, his mother totally ignored that coming out conversation with her son and started to keep insisting on Adel to get married to save face:

> "She was telling me that I should get married and have a family. She is the only person in the family pushing me to get married. Neither my siblings nor my father did that. After the war, they actually stopped thinking about this issue. Because everybody is just concerned about himself or herself" (Adel, 35).

Tarek has another experience during his coming out process. He divides his coming out process into three segments. He firstly realized that he has some feelings towards his male friend. Secondly, he noticed that he sexually and romantically desires men. The third and last part is accepting his sexuality and coming out to his parents.

"I was ten years old the first time I felt that I feel something different towards my male friend. At the time, I didn't feel something sexual, but I felt something emotional towards him. I felt like I want to go to school to see him. […] When I was 15 years old, I realized that my sexual needs were oriented to the men. It was so weird. Because when it was only emotions, it was normal. But the sexual needs… At the beginning I thought I was the only person [who is gay] in this world. I was not aware that it was possible. So, my first reaction was, "oh, my God! Something is seriously wrong with me!" Then, I started reading online about homosexuality and same-sex relations. And I realized that I was not the only person" (Tarek, 29).

As also mentioned in Whitaker's book titled *Unspeakable Love* (2006), Arabic online sources legally and religiously criminalize homosexuality. Hence, gay men who is able to speak another language, mostly English, would prefer reading from international sources.

"Whenever you read an article about homosexuality in an Arabic website, they refer it as a sin and a crime. Being homosexual is a crime, both religiously and legally. And if you are even talking about homosexuality, you are a *kafir*[33]" (Tarek, 29).

The ones who can reach international sources are fortunate because they realize that they are not the only one in the world who is gay and it becomes easier for them to accept their sexuality. However, Arabic sources do not help gay men at all, but pushes them to a deeper blame and loneliness. Nader had his first sex when he was 12 years old with a male classmate in elementary school. He did not question himself until one of his teachers warned

students not to get in *Lut* act[34], because it is a sin and if they perform the *Lut* act, the earth would shake under them.

> "From this very day, my suffering started. I started thinking about why God created me like this and why I'm different than my friends. This questioning and suffering started in 2003 and eventually I accepted myself in 2010. During those years, I tried to learn the Qur'an and started praying. I was really religious between these years. And since the Qur'an says, if you act *Lut* you become prostitute, I thought myself as a sinner. In 2004, I started searching online about sodomite and *Lut*. Can you imagine? I even did not know the word homosexuality. I wrote [on Google] like what happened to *Lut* people in Arabic. Everything was criminalized and awful – disgusting. It made me feel more desperate and lonely. I felt frightened because it was saying that if you do the *Lut* act, you simply destroy your future. Then I found a website in Arabic. They were psychologists giving online counseling. I wrote to them and told them that I have this problem and I want you to solve it. They told me you are like this because you have problems with your father. You should not be close to your mother. Then I saw a psychiatrist and he suggested me to have sex with a woman and if that does not help, he would start an electroshock therapy" (Nader, 28).

Nader has never gone through an electroshock therapy, however he tried everything in order to 'fix his problem' for the following seven years. He was prescribed several medicines which made him, in his own words, "a walking robot who did not have any feelings and thoughts and left him without no energy to maintain his daily life activities". Last time he went out from his psychiatrist's office, he found a quiet street and cried for hours.

> "After I stopped crying, I felt that the stone in my stomach which was there for several years just disappeared. How, why, I don't know. But at that moment I told myself that I am gay. I felt light as a feather. And then happiness has come" (Nader, 28).

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It is difficult to come out in Syria, but for some gay men, it is totally impossible even to accept their sexuality. Sami is one of those people. When he was in Syria, he did not even want to think about his sexuality:

"I didn't have any sexual or romantic experience in Syria. I think I was twelve the first time I realized that I was gay. In Syria, we didn't have the same open-minded gays as in Turkey. For 22 years, I didn't tell a single soul [that I am gay]. I was afraid all the time and I was embarrassed. I always thought that I wasn't a good person because I'm gay" (Sami, 23).

Sami only accepted his sexuality when he came to Turkey. One day, he heard his closest friend talking to someone on the phone about his relationship. Sami noticed that his closest friend was mentioning a man and asked him about this conversation over the phone.

"I met this friend in Istanbul and he is still my closest friend. I didn't know that he is also gay. I heard him talking over the phone. I heard this conversation about a man and I felt shocked. I asked him about this conversation and he was comfortable [with his sexuality]. He told me that he is gay and I told that I'm gay too. He helped me to accept myself and feel comfortable [with my sexuality]" (Sami, 23).

Sami still did not tell his parents that he is gay although he brings up the subject to his parents:

"Sometimes I try to ask my family about their opinion about gays. They say they don't care about them. They say that they [gays] can do whatever they want to do. They say gays are not their concern. Just like this. I think… I don't know if they'll accept me. I'm not sure about that. Sometimes I try to tell them but it's not possible" (Sami, 23).

As it is difficult for gay men to come out of the closet and accept their sexuality in the global context, Syrian gay men are the ones who suffer more during their coming out process and even after this process. The lack of access to correct scientific information on

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homosexuality intertwined with intense social pressures and prejudice against homosexuality, gay men usually are in denial at first. Access to internet is an important tool for people to reach correct information on this particular subject, yet those who do not speak any other language than Arabic might find themselves in a more depressing and pessimist situation due to misinformation on and criminalization of homosexuality on Arabic websites.

Some gay men, like Sami, feels more comfortable in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, and accept their sexuality in Turkey. Although Istanbul is safer and more liberal than many places in Syria in terms of LGBTI issues, it is important to question how respondents have imagined Istanbul before they arrived and how they experience the city now as Syrian gay men.

4.4. Istanbul: The Ultimate Safe Haven for Syrian Gay Men?

Whether Istanbul was their first option to arrive or not, all seven interviewees indicated that Istanbul made them feel comfortable with their sexual orientation. Most of them felt the courage to come out in Istanbul. Yet, they do face several problems concerning their ethnic and/or national identity once they arrive in Turkey. Also, suggesting that Istanbul made those interviewees feel more comfortable and in peace does not necessarily mean that Istanbul provides a secure environment for queer refugees.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Wesam Sankari has been murdered brutally in Istanbul just because of his sexual orientation in 2016.[35] The case on Sankari's murder has been concluded and the murderer has been sentenced to 15 years. Murderer's imprisonment time has been decreased due to his 'good behavior' during the lawsuit and 'unjust provocation' by the victim.[36] Unjust provocation is only a tool of extenuation for that kind of homophobic and/or transphobic murders.

Although Turkey does certainly not have a good report when it comes to attitudes towards homosexuality and transsexuality, the situation regarding sexual orientation and gender identity is relatively better than any other Middle Eastern countries. For example, it is still illegal to engage in same-sex conduct in Arab countries, such as Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia. Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iran impose death penalty on the same-sex conduct. That is why most Syrian gay men prefer Turkey either as a transit country before they arrive in Europe or as a country for permanent settlement.

Syrian gay men with whom I made interviews have different migration paths before they came to Turkey. Four of my interviewees have travelled directly to Turkey and three of them lived in different countries before their arrival in Turkey either for a long time or for a short time after they left Syria. Nader is one of the interviewees that travelled a lot before he came to Turkey, even though he himself would have preferred coming directly to Turkey. He had to leave Syria urgently and his best option at the time was to escape to Egypt:

> "I was looking forward to the new freedom or the freedom that gives to more liberties. I don't know… I was participating in the protests. However, after one year, it just turned into something totally different. It turned into an Islamic revolution. People were killing each other because of their religious background. The revolution was not that revolution I thought anymore, but it was something more Islamic. It was like an Islamic revolution. […] I stepped back, because they were fighting to protect the religion, as they say. But I wasn't still thinking about leaving the country at all. The thing that made me to leave the country happened suddenly and I found myself in Egypt three days later. Well, I had a cousin, he was in military service. He did not want to obey the rules and kill the people. He escaped from the military and went to Jordan. He stayed there like three months and one day he called me and asked me if I could help him to go back to Syria. I put him in contact with some of my friends in Syria, but on his way to Damascus, the army stopped the car and shot everyone. I was

waiting for him, but he never showed up. In the evening, the news declared that there was a terrorist group trying to get into Syria and my cousin's name was among the names in the list. He was murdered and I was the only one who talked to him. I thought I had to leave the country immediately. I booked the first plane ticket and escaped to Egypt. After I arrived to Cairo, the secret police knocked the door of my family back in Syria and inquired about me."

As Nader explains he did not think about leaving country before he thought he would be chased by the secret police. He went to the first country that he could go without much hesitation. As he explained:

"I went to Egypt, but I didn't want to go there. I wanted to go to Turkey and there was no visa requirement back in that time. But my father told me that going to Turkey and staying there would be too expensive. Also, I had another cousin of mine already living in Egypt. I know the language, I have a place to stay for a while and less expensive. So, I went to Egypt because of financial conditions. I would have chosen to come to Turkey directly."

Yet, he just stayed in Egypt for one year. When Mursi's fall as a political figure had begun, he felt unease in Egypt because of his nationality and his sexual orientation.

"Fall of Mursi started everything. I was relatively safe when he was president. No secret police trying to arrest people, no police attacking gay men. People were kind to Syrians. When Mursi fell, I could no longer live in Egypt. Police were arresting gay people, the society did not want Syrians. For example, something bad is happening. In the news, they say that it is because of Syrians. So, I told my parents that I wanted to go to Turkey. But my father did not allow me to go to Turkey again because of financial reasons. And I went to Jordan instead, because I have a sister there. But Syrians were not allowed to get into Jordan. So, my father somehow gave money to a police officer in Jordan and they announced my name in the airport in Cairo. I went to

an office there and they brought me to Jordan. When I arrived in my sister's home, she told me to prepare myself to work tomorrow, because I had to pay back 1,000 USD back to my family. This was how much they paid to bribe this police officer into getting me into Jordan."

After Nader spent six months in Jordan, he had no choice but leave Jordan for Turkey. Because he was working too hard, earning little money, and Jordan was not a country for him to live in peace as a gay man. After paying the bribe money back to his family, he went to Turkey:

"From the beginning, I wanted to go to Turkey. I felt that I would have more choices there [in Turkey]. Like more freedom… Somehow, when I was thinking about Turkey, I was thinking about freedom. Also, Turkey was offering a new culture to me. I wanted to discover. I wanted to live this opportunity. In Syria, I didn't have this opportunity and I wanted to have this [opportunity]."

Zaid is the other informant who went to Lebanon first because he had a deal with a smuggler to go directly to Europe:

"Firstly, I went to Beirut and I stayed there almost two months with this smuggler and his family. He was supposed to take me to Europe. In Beirut, we were waiting for other people to join us. That way he could have made more money after getting more people to travel. He was supposed to take us to Germany. We were waiting, waiting and he was spending the money that I gave him. Day by day, he finished all the money by paying rent for his house and buying food. When he finished all the money, he found more people to bring to Europe, but he took us to Tripoli in Lebanon. In Tripoli, he told us that he spent all the money and he could not take us to Europe. I gave him 7,000 USD , but I ended up in another city in Lebanon. […] He was giving us excuses and told us that he would find another smuggler. At the end, he left me in Tripoli and disappeared and I didn't have even a *lira* to buy food. I was living in the streets and

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sleeping in the parks. […] I didn't tell my family at the time about my situation not to make them worry about me. So I knew a guy who is originally Syrian. I met him though this smuggler. He was a kind man, he let me sleep over in his place and I stayed there for 10 days. Then I told my family that the smuggler has just disappeared and I'm out of money. They sent me another 2,000 USD although they did not have much money. They just spent almost all their money for me to be smuggled to Europe. This time, I went to Sharja in the United Arab Emirates, but I decided that I could not live there. It was very expensive. Then I went to Iran by plane. A friend of mine in Iran introduced me another smuggler in Iran. So I finally reached Turkey. This new smuggler brought me to a place like a depot. I waited there for 10 days with other people who were waiting to be taken to Turkey. These were Afghan people. I was the only Syrian there. I was so scared because I did not understand anything what they were talking about and I was afraid if they would find out that I'm gay. […] At the end, they put us in a small vehicle and brought us to Ankara. When I arrived in Ankara, I had no money. Then I realized that I hid 100 USD in my pocket and I bought a bus ticket to Izmir. In Izmir, I bought a bus ticket to Istanbul immediately."

Zaid went to Izmir from Ankara, because bus companies in Ankara did not sell a ticket to Istanbul when they saw Zaid's Syrian passport. Yet, in Izmir he was able to buy a ticket to Istanbul and that was how he arrived in Istanbul where he had one Syrian friend that he knew. Additionally, Zaid told me during the recording that he was raped in a park in Tripoli by a stranger when he was living in the streets. Yet he did not want to go in details.

The third interviewee who did not come directly to Turkey is Ayman, yet his case is quite different. He did not leave Syria because of war in the country, but because of his doctoral studies. Ayman went to Lebanon for his PhD degree. He did not have a certain answer for his reasons to leave Lebanon and settling in Turkey. However, because his studies

still continue and he has an educational connection with Lebanon, he regularly visits Lebanon and comes back to Istanbul.

The rest of the interviewees have come directly to Turkey either with their families or on their own. Yet, they all had some ideas on Turkey in their mind before the war and before their arrival. They have seen Turkey as a liberal and secular country where people enjoy liberty of any kind.

Ayman and Adel were two of the informants who have visited Turkey before the war. Adel was impressed when he came to Turkey for the first time, as he said:

> "My computer screen savers were all photos from Turkey. Especially Istanbul. I came
>
> to Istanbul in 2010 for a business trip. I was like 'Oh! My dream has come true!'.
>
> During this trip I had so much fun in Turkey."

While Adel's dream has come true when he visited Istanbul for a business trip and he enjoyed the city, Istanbul was a disappointment for Ayman.

> "I came to Istanbul in 2005. For touristic reasons. Before I came here, I thought
>
> Turkey was the Atatürk's republic. I expected to see that. When I saw people in hijab,
>
> I was surprised. Because I thought Atatürk's republic would be much more secular
>
> than what I saw."

Ayman is still not happy with social and cultural atmosphere in Istanbul. Yet, Adel is more comfortable and happy than Ayman is. I believe this difference stems from familial and religious background of these two interviewees. While Adel is from a Sunni Muslim family and he identifies himself as a Muslim who practices the rules of Islam, Ayman is from an Assyrian Orthodox family who are secular. Also, Ayman does not practice any religion and he identifies himself as a staunch secular. This must have been why Ayman was disappointed when he visited Turkey and realized that the country was not as secular as he thought in the

public sphere. Yet, secularism was not the first image of Turkey for Adel and he was already coming from a family that women don headscarves.

Sami is the other interviewee who has always wished to visit Turkey albeit in a different status:

"I wanted to visit Turkey and I always dreamed that I was visiting Turkey and having fun. I was looking at Istanbul photos through Google. Sometimes, I was reading articles about Turkey, Turkish history, and Turkish culture. My imagination of Turkey did not change after I came here. Istanbul offers better conditions for Syrians than Egypt or Lebanon. Turkey is the best country for Syrian refugees."

All seven interviewees agree that Turkey is the best country for them among other options like Egypt, Lebanon, and/or Jordan. Yet they do face problems regarding their national/ethnic identity. As Sami suggests:

"The biggest problem in Turkey is racism. When they hear me speaking in Arabic, people look at us in a hostile way, does some gestures implying that they don't like us. Most people are just being rude."

Negative and aggressive behavior or racist attitudes, in other words, towards Syrian refugees create problems for those people and increase the tension between two communities – the locals and the refugees. Racist attitudes and discourses shape the ways Syrian refugees experience their lives in Istanbul. When the case is queer refugees, homophobia and transphobia become another burden for them. The interviewees established some different coping mechanisms in order to deal with racism and homophobia which determine also the ways how they socialize in Istanbul.

4.5. Socialization in a Hostile Environment

"When I'm in a bus, I'm talking in Arabic with my Syrian friend. And another man is looking at us in a hostile way, making some voices that implies he doesn't like us. It is not that we are talking loud, I swear. Turkish people are talking louder than we are in the bus. It is because he doesn't like us because we are talking in Arabic, because we are Syrians. This guy then yells towards us: *'Gidin ülkenize ya!'*[37]"

This is neither the first racist attitude Sami faces in his daily life nor is he the only one among Syrian refugee population in Turkey who experiences such kind of situations. Tarek has another experience which exhibits the prejudiced and racist attitudes towards Syrians.

"I was in Beşiktaş with my boyfriend. We sat in a café to have breakfast and you know, it is a regular place for us that we hang out a lot. So, everybody hanging out there know us. But, there was an old man sitting next to us, he was drinking his coffee. Because my boyfriend is Turkish and doesn't speak Arabic, we speak in English. That old man realized that we are speaking in English, but I guess he also noticed that we have an accent. I mean we are not native speakers in English. He turned to us then and interrupted by saying '*Excuse me, are you tourists?*'. My boyfriend told him that he was Turkish. Then, the man turned me and asked me where I came from. I told him that I am from Syria. Oh God! You should have seen how his expression on his face changed immediately. He was super kind towards me while he was talking to me, but the minute he learned that I was Syrian, he got mad. He started speaking in Turkish and my boyfriend calmly talked to him like he [boyfriend] was trying to convince him on something. A few minutes later my boyfriend told me that we should be going or he is going to make a scene. We left this place and I asked him what that old man told him in Turkish. He told me that the old man told him the Syrian people came to Turkey to kill Turkish people and steal their jobs, and that Syrian people are filthy and barbarians who do not know how to behave or talk in public. I was furious and he was just stupid. He was talking to me in a polite way before he knew that I was Syrian."

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Because of bad experiences they hear or experience first hand, some Syrian people establish a wall between themselves and local Turkish population. Ayman is one of them. He does not prefer socializing with Turkish, because he does not want to put an effort on changing people's minds on Syrians.

"I have no Turkish friends, I didn't even try to make friends with them. […] I like to stay in safe area. I don't want anyone to say '*You are Syrian and that, that, that…*' Because I go crazy if I see it. I'm not that calm as I look. I don't try to have Turkish friends because I want to protect myself."

Yet, unlike Ayman, Tarek wants to change people's minds.

"I don't prefer saying directly that I'm Syrian. I don't introduce myself as a Syrian. Because I know that some people might be affected by this information. I believe that we should get to know each other personally first. Then you can tell them your nationality. You know, the word Syrian is almost equal to a curse right now in Turkey. Two days ago, I was walking in the Istiklal Street and a woman was shouting to the other one '*You Syrian!*' At those times, I feel anger. Because some Turkish people believe that they are more modern or more educated than Syrians. Come on, that's not true! […] I have studied Computer Engineering. What did this guy study? He is a high school graduate. How many languages does he speak? Only his native language! I do speak 3 languages: English, Arabic, and Turkish. So what does make him feel that he is more educated or in a higher position than I am? I talk to people. I tell them what I did, what I do, and what I plan to do. When you know someone, you start examining your thoughts. That's how prejudices disappear. For example, I have a Turkish friend, her name is Özlem. She confessed that before she knew me she signed an e-petition stating that they don't want any Syrian people in Turkey. She said that before she knew me she thought all Syrians were beggars in the street. But after she knew me she

realized that she was wrong. So, I believe one of the missions I have to do here is to change the way that people see us."

Tarek is the only respondent who have more Turkish friends than Syrian ones in Turkey. The rest mostly hangs out with their Syrian friends they met in Turkey or with Syrians they knew from Syria. Nader, who was resettled to Norway, also did not have close Turkish friends and preferred hanging out only with his Syrian friends in Istanbul.

While it is difficult for Syrian gay men to socialize with the local population, the story becomes more complex when they try to socialize with local gay population In Istanbul. Tarek is the only one of the interviewees who has a Turkish boyfriend. The rest has or had only Syrian boyfriends during their stay in Istanbul. The interviewees had complaints about Turkish gay men's approach towards intimate relationships. As Ayman claims:

"I think we have a huge difference in mind. We don't see through the same perspective. I think we are just different. I don't know how. We are different people, we don't share the same points of views. For example, love. We don't share the same idea on love with Turkish gay men. […] It has nothing to do with the culture. I think the feelings are different. We, Syrians, are more emotional than Turkish gay men."

Adel also does not like Turkish gay men's attitudes. He claims:

"Here, when I talk to a Turkish gay man, he is only into sex with me. He doesn't care about what I feel, or he doesn't try to be in a relationship with me. They mostly want to have sex. When I'm using the application, I say let's go to a café and drink coffee and talk. They say, show me your… I mean, they say, send nudes. I don't share, I feel offended. They are so aggressive."

Zaid is an interviewee who does not want to live in Turkey and waiting for his resettlement application process to be finished soon. His impatience to be resettled into a third country also had to do with the attitudes of Turkish gay men.

"To be honest, I want to leave Turkey really soon. I don't like Turkish gay men and I don't want to date any Turkish gay men. They are so cliquey. I don't know why they are acting like they are better than me. They are not. The way they are treating me is enough for me to create an image of how they are. And believe me, that image is not good at all. […] Some Turkish gay men do not answer me online when they learn that I'm Syrian. Some of them block me. One of them told me, '*You are living in Turkey, go learn Turkish and then you are allowed to write to me.*' I do not write any Turkish guys over these applications because they are rude and stupid."

All the interviewees have been using online gay dating applications, such as Hornet, Tinder, Scruff. These online spaces might also turn into prejudiced environments. As Sami explains:

"They [Turkish gay men] are prejudiced [against Syrians]. They don't even know that we have cities in Syria, we have a history, and we have a culture. For example, some guys asked me if we have cars in Syria. I told them that '*No, we are using horses and camels as vehicle.*'"

Turkish gay men mostly approach to Syrian gay men as an authentic and oriental object which is unknown and mysterious. Although Turkey and Syria are neighboring countries, Turkish gay men's knowledge on Syria and Syrians are very limited and mostly determined by the mainstream media. Since mainstream media is exhibiting Syrian refugee issue unilaterally, it becomes difficult for local population to see this particular issue from a broader perspective. The sharp contradiction between what is in reality and what is

shown/broadcasted through images and stories shapes and determines the socialization experiences of Syrian gay refugees in Turkey.

Adel is a blonde, blue-eyed, good-looking man. He is also fluent in English. His psychical appearance does not match with the stereotypical appearance of a Syrian man which is mostly depicted as dark-colored, somehow-coarse, and Arabic-speaking-only type. Adel explains how he feels discriminated despite his looks and human capital:

"When Turkish people or Turkish gay men I dated learns that I am Syrian, they are like '*Oh, I thought you are German or Russian.*' and I say '*No, I'm Syrian. I'm sorry to disappoint you.*' in a sarcastic way. In Turkey, it's always like this. Not only my dates, but everyone. When I'm in a cab, or in a restaurant, people always ask and when they learn my nationality, they say '*You don't look like a Syrian.*' And I consider this is kind of discrimination. […] It is difficult to be a Syrian refugee in Turkey. They have a certain type in their mind, everybody knows that. But, I speak very good English and I have a proper job and I am educated. I am also living in Şişli, and this is good for them. So, I am a 'white Syrian' for them. Since I am a white Syrian the level of respect they show me increases. But I would receive more respect if I were German or Russian. Even though I am worthy of respect and equal to them, I am still a refugee."

Being a "white Syrian" is not only a class issue, but also an ethnic issue. Thus, being labeled as a "white Syrian" has its own advantages and disadvantages. In Adel's case, advantages mostly stem from his social class, his residential area, being fluent in English, and having a proper job. This makes him an 'acceptable' refugee who is almost equal to his local acquaintances. Disadvantages stem from his ethnicity/nationality, because he is an Arab Syrian and connotations of Arabic identity are seen as inferior characteristics, almost equivalent to being barbarian, unmodern, underdeveloped. Such disadvantages become much

more pronounced with his legal status and his sexual orientation: a refugee and a gay. Therefore, he is almost obsessed with respect.

That is probably why Tarek does not embrace the refugee identity from the outset. He identifies himself as an immigrant instead. Tarek is also a "white Syrian" as Adel's description of the term. He is strongly against the refugee identity people put on his shoulders due to his national identity and makes his own refugee description.

"I am not a refugee, no! First of all, I am not under temporary protection in Turkey. I have residence permit in this country. I can go wherever I want. I can go out and in of this country. Secondly… You know what… People have a negative idea [of refugees] and I understand them somehow. We had Lebanese and Iraqi refugees in Syria. Whenever you see a refugee, you feel pity in the first year. After one year, there are economic consequences. Everything gets expensive and you see a lot of beggars in the streets. The media starts to focus on crimes committed by the refugees. Like if there's 1 million crimes committed in Turkey on a particular day, if 1 out of 1 million is committed by a Syrian refugee, they forget the rest and suddenly refugees become the scapegoats. And also people think that the refugees are inferior, are less than them. But no! I'm ten times better than a regular Turkish person. […] A refugee for me is a person who lost everything and trying to start over, trying to find safety, trying to find a way to support his life."

Like Adel, Tarek also values himself and rejects the demeaning behavior of local people towards Syrian refugees. He also builds a wall between himself and the Syrian community in Turkey – a barrier built upon socio-economic differences and sexual identity. He sees himself differently from the majority of the Syrians who tend to be less educated and homophobic. He has only two Syrian friends in Istanbul whom he knew back in Syria.

"Tarek: I prefer to have a person, a friend in my life who is educated and open minded. We should have things in common that we can talk about and we can share. I don't like to have a friend who is not in the same level of mentality. *Yani,* I need someone in my mentality to get along. In Istanbul, there are some places you would not like to live there. Because you would not feel yourself fitting in that community. That's the same for me. I don't want to see people or befriend with people that I do not fit in. […] I didn't try to make Syrian gay or straight friends in Istanbul, because I know the community. They like gossiping a lot.

Kerem: But you have so many Turkish gay friends. Do you think Turkish gay community is better than Syrian gay community in Istanbul?

Tarek: No, but a little bit better. I mean here you have many, many options. Let's say there are 1000 Turkish gay men for 10 Syrian gay man. My Turkish and foreigner gay friends are not building their lives on their gay identity. I want that. Syrian gay men in Istanbul are building their lives around their sexual orientation. That's wrong. That's also why I socialize with Turkish people and expats. I am a foreigner in this country, and I hang out with foreigners, not Syrians. That's normal."

Zaid also does not want to befriend Syrian gay men and his has his own reasons and experiences. As he points out:

"I date Syrian gay men, but I do not make friends. They are all escorts. Sometimes, when I talk to people over dating applications, Turkish people ask me if I am an escort. Because almost all Syrian gay men are escorts, they think of me in this way. I hate this. […] I also don't want to be friended with Syrians because they only care about money. They want to use the person in any way they can use. They are also changing their characters when they arrive in Turkey. I knew a guy from Damascus. He was super masculine and serving in the military. When he came to Istanbul, he

became super feminine and now he is doing belly dance in a club. They come to Turkey, feel comfortable and safe, and become like a woman."

Zaid, with his internal homophobia and transphobia, decided that Turkey is not a country where he wants to live for good. That's why he applied for resettlement and he dreams of good times in Europe. Many people like Zaid focus on the resettlement country – usually in Western Europe and stop questioning about any difficulties they might face once they reach there. After a cost-benefit analysis, though, living in global North seems like a better option for LGBTI refugees. Nader achieved to be resettled in Norway, yet he still remembers his times in Istanbul in a good way. But he is happy to be in Norway because of the opportunities it provides.

> "I cannot say anything bad about my times in Istanbul. Yes, I had come across with shitty people and experienced bad thing. But, overall, Istanbul was perfect for me. I had my boyfriend in Istanbul. I was super comfortable with my sexual orientation and I felt that Istanbul offers you that liberation regarding your sexual orientation. I worked a lot, yes! Sometimes I could not have time to party or hang out with friends. But I had good Turkish friends and good Syrian friends. Gay or straight! Doesn't matter. I liked Turkey. I liked being in Istanbul. It was different from my hometown. More liberal and much more gay-friendly for sure. I miss it, now. But if you ask me to leave Norway and go back to Turkey, my answer would be no! Norway is much better. More democratic, much more interested in his citizens' demands and you know what, it also supplies those demands. […] As a Syrian gay man, Norway treats me as equal to Norwegian citizens. So, yes! I'm glad that I'm in Norway now."

4.6. What About Future?

Although Turkey offers better conditions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity among other Middle Eastern countries, for most of the Syrian gay men, Europe is the

ultimate destination they would like to reach. Five out of seven interviewees are under temporary protection and they have applied to UNHCR in order to be resettled into a third country which is either a European country or a North American one. Two out of seven do have residence permits in Turkey and are not interested in being resettled, yet they would not accept Turkish citizenship even if Turkish government offers.

Adel at some point of time was interested in having Turkish citizenship, but he gave up after he lost his job at an NGO.

> "It's too late now. I decided to leave the country [Turkey]. I wanted to get the citizenship very much, but now I applied for resettlement. […] After I lost my job, I found myself like I achieved nothing in Turkey. I mean I spent 2 years in Turkey and then I lost my job. I had no permanent residency, so I cannot leave country to see my mom. I cannot come back if I leave Turkey. I'm not earning proper money. Even with all my… I mean, I speak very good English. I have a long term work experience in Syria. So, I felt like I need somewhere else where I can feel more stable."

After our interview, Adel found another position at another NGO focusing on Syrian refugees, yet Adel still does not want to stay in Turkey. But his process still continues.

Sami and Mike are two interviewees whose resettlement process has been resulted. Sami is still waiting for French Embassy to call him and invite him for the very last interview before his resettlement. Sami is very excited about being resettled in France and the opportunities it will bring.

> "I could not imagine going to France, like 10 years ago. I will start a new life there. A normal life. I want to live my sexual identity. I'm gay. I don't want to pretend I'm a straight guy like I do now. I mean Istanbul made me come out and feel comfortable, but it's not enough for me to live my life as a gay man. I just want to be myself in France. And of course, I want to finish my education. Because when I will tell my

family that I'm gay, I want them to be proud of me. Because I want to be a guy who achieve something in his life. My parents are so proud of me because I work and support them. I am a good son to them. Everyone loves me. But in the future, if they know about me [my sexual orientation], I don't want them to feel shame."

At the time of our interview, Mike was also waiting for a call from the Dutch Embassy for the very last interview before he is resettled in the Netherlands. In the end of September, Mike has been finally resettled. We had a facetime conversation with him in his second week after he arrived in the Netherlands. He was happy and excited about being in the Netherlands.

"I am so happy to be here. I guess, I missed Istanbul a little bit. But, I don't know. For now, I had so many good experiences. People just accept me as I am - as a Syrian gay man and as a Syrian refugee and they treat me equally. [….] And you know… I think they like my dark-color, you know. When I write '*Hi!*' on Grindr, they do write me back. And it's almost no problem for them that I am Syrian. You know… in Turkey, most of guys would block me or stop writing me back."

Zaid is the most willing interviewee who wants to be resettled in a third country. Although it was his second month in Istanbul when I interviewed him, he had already applied to UNHCR for resettlement.

"I never wanted to come to Turkey. My first aim was to go to Europe, but you know all this story with human smugglers. So I ended up in Turkey. But I want to leave Turkey immediately. That's not my dream living in Istanbul. I want to go to Germany. My all friends are in Germany now. Also, at least gay marriage is now legal in there. So, we [gay people] have more rights in Germany. And the government will take care of me and pay me monthly in order to afford my food. And I want to continue my studies in Germany. The government will cover all those expenses for university. Here, in Turkey, the government does not cover any of those expenses."

All these five interviewees who have been resettled or waiting to be resettled have their valid reasons to go to the Western countries, yet the two interviewees, Ayman and Tarek, have also their reasons to stay, although they have concerns about living in Turkey.

Ayman has patriotic tendencies and strongly against getting Turkish citizenship and also being resettled into a third country.

> "I don't want any citizenship. Neither Turkish nor the other ones. When the war has started, I was already in the opposition side. My family is in opposition side. I'm proud of my nationality. I think Syrian citizenship is the best one in whole world. I am in the opposition side of the regime and it is not appropriate for me to claim another citizenship."

Tarek does not support any sides in the civil war. He came to Turkey in order to run away from compulsory military service because he did not want to participate in the war and get to kill his own people for nothing, in his own words. But, he is confused about getting Turkish citizenship.

> "Well, I don't know about Turkish citizenship. It's a tough question for me. I thought about it a lot and still didn't get the answer. I don't have any conclusion about this issue in my mind. I still have reasons to have citizenship and not to have it. […] I want citizenship if I want to stay here. Because if I stay here, I want to feel myself more involved into society. If I have this paper stating that I am a Turkish citizen, I would not be discriminated. […] Nationality or citizenship is nothing for me. But if I have this citizenship, I will have my rights."

Tarek does not think to apply for resettlement in a third country for now. Because he has a proper job right now and he has a Turkish boyfriend in Istanbul.

> "I don't plan to go to Europe for now. I have a strong reason to stay here, which is my boyfriend. […] If he wasn't here I would feel freer to go, but now I don't feel that. But

you know what, I don't see any future here in Turkey. Let me tell you what happened a couple days ago: We were walking next to a graveyard with my boyfriend. And he told me that his family has been buried in this graveyard. So he will be buried when he died. Then I told him what about me? Where you are going to put me when I die? He said that he cannot make me buried in this graveyard, because I don't have any proper documents. I mean I don't have citizenship and everything. He said that the law does not allow foreigners to be buried in Turkey, but my body would be sent to Syria to be buried. At that time, I felt so insecure. If I die, what's going to happen to me? Even after my death, I have to worry about myself. If I die, I don't have the right to lie under Turkish ground. Even I don't feel comfortable about my stay in Turkey when I'm alive, you know they can cancel my residential permit… When this is the case, even my body, my dead body cannot stay in Turkey. That not humane. That's tough. That night that I learned this situation, I cried a lot. Because I don't feel secure about my future in Turkey."

Insecurity is a common feeling among Syrian gay men. Yet, they do not think that they will feel secure in Syria too when the war is ended. Only Ayman plans to go back to Syria when the war finished.

"After the war finishes, I will go back to my country. To rebuild it. Everybody damaged it, and it is in ruins right now. I will go back there and help to rebuild it to make it good again."

Although everybody missed Syria and their life back there, nobody, except Ayman, thinks about going back Syria for good. Adel explains:

"I'm 35 years old right now. I don't think myself in Syria establishing a long term relationship now. It's not a good time. There will not be a good time for gay people in Syria for a long time. So, I don't think I would go back there again."

Sami misses his country, yet moving back to Syria for good is not an option for him.

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"I miss my country a lot. But, living there permanently… I don't think so. It is impossible to live in Syria. Especially if you are a gay man. I want to live as an out gay man. If war ends someday, I will go to Syria for vacation. Nothing more."

CHAPTER 5: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Masculinities Theory

Men and masculinities have been underrepresented or rarely mentioned in social sciences although the women's movement gained momentum and gave rise to scholarship on

women and feminist ideology. Yet, considering men as "explicitly gendered individuals is relatively relevant" (Coltrane, 1994: 41). The first distinct examples of research on men and masculinities date back to the 1980s and as Scott Coltrane mentions these studies and writings were "often confessional, therapeutic, and ignorant of the power relations […] focusing on [writer's] personal experiences" such as men's child-care processes, middle-aged men's longing for their fathers, and the ways men were misunderstood by women (1994: 41). In addition to that, in the 1970s and early 1980s, "most discussions of men's gender centered on an established concept, the male sex role, and an established problem: how men and boys were socialized into this role" (Connell, 1998: 3) without an explicit analysis of power relations. While social science scholars in different fields are aware of power relations in the society and between individuals, and also take those power relations seriously, the very first examples of studies on men willingly or unwillingly neglected to include power relations. According to Coltrane, this neglect might stem from the first studies' focus on "the lived reality of most men's lives [which] runs the risk of reproducing patriarchal consciousness" (1994: 55). In order to overcome this risk, Messner (1990) offers an inclusive approach to study men and masculinity with race, class, and gendered and sexual inequalities which actually is affected by Connell's (1987) earlier conceptualization of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities.

As Connell and Messerschmidt state, "the concept of hegemonic masculinity […] has considerably influenced recent thinking on men, gender, and social hierarchy. It has provided a link between the growing research field of men's studies […], popular anxieties about men and boys, feminist accounts of patriarchy, and sociological models of gender" (2005: 829-830). Connell further explains hegemonic masculinity as "the cultural patterns of action that allow some men to maintain dominance over females and subordinated males. Displays of aggression, independence, competition, and a rejection of femininity are thought to be

culturally honored ways of being man, so that enacting these qualities allows men to do gender while also reproducing a system of gender inequality" (2005: 471). Connell (1998) characterizes certain details of hegemonic masculinity as follows:

"*Plural Masculinities.* […] Different cultures and different periods in history construct gender differently. Striking differences exist, for instance, in the relationship of homosexual practice to dominant forms of masculinity. In multicultural societies, there are varying definitions and enactments of masculinity, for instance, between Anglo and Latino communities in the United States. Equally important, more than one kind of masculinity can be found within a given cultural setting and institution.

Hierarchy and hegemony. These plural masculinities exist in definite social relations often relations of hierarchy and exclusion. […] There is a generally hegemonic form of masculinity, the most honored or desired in a particular context. […] The dominance of hegemonic masculinity over other forms may be quiet and implicit, but it may also be vehement and violent, as in the important case of homophobic violence.

Bodies as arenas. Men's bodies do not determine the patterns of masculinity, but they are still of great importance in masculinity. Men's bodies are addressed, defined, and disciplined, and given outlets and pleasures by the gender order of society.

Active construction. Masculinities do not exist prior to social interaction, but come into existence as people act. They are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given milieu.

Contradiction. Masculinities are not homogeneous, simple states of being. Close-focus research on masculinities commonly identifies contradictory desires and conduct.

Dynamics. Masculinities created in specific historical circumstances are liable to reconstruction, and any pattern of hegemony is subject to contestation, in which a dominant masculinity may be displaced" (6).

Michael Kimmel also views masculinity as a dynamic notion which is "a constantly changing collection of meanings that [men] construct through [their] relationships with [themselves], with each other, and with [the] world" (1994: 120). Kimmel proposes the notion of "marketplace masculinity" in order to describe the normative definition of American masculinity. He centers his idea of masculinity on power relations not only between genders but also between men and their particular masculinities. According to Kimmel, marketplace masculinity is a notion to describe masculinities' "characteristics –aggression, competition, anxiety- and the arena in which those characteristics are deployed –the public sphere, the marketplace" (1994: 124). Thus, "if the marketplace is the arena in which manhood is tested and proved, it is a gendered arena, in which tensions between women and men and tensions among different groups of men are weighted with meaning. These tensions suggest that cultural definitions of gender are played out in a contested terrain and are themselves power relations" (1994: 124).

Considering Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity (1998) and Kimmel's definition of marketplace masculinity (1994), it can be said that masculinities are multiple and flexible, and also masculinities are not equal to one another. By quoting Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity, Kimmel suggests that "the hegemonic definition of manhood is a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power. We equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control. The very definitions of manhood we have developed in our culture maintain the power that some men have over other men and that men have over women" (1994: 125). The idea of hegemonic masculinity that Kimmel talks about brings up the notion of a man who is "white, middle class, early middle-aged, [and] heterosexual" (1994: 124). The power that hegemonic masculinity puts on the shoulder of the men renders the other men who are not 'masculine enough' unsuccessful, less valuable, and vulnerable.

Kimmel, in his article, also correlate homophobia and hegemonic masculinity. As he suggests, "homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay. […] Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as manly as we pretend, that we are" (1994: 131). As hegemonic masculinity is exclusionary, when it comes together with homophobia "women and gay men become the 'other' against which heterosexual men project their identities, against whom they stack the decks so as to compete in a situation in which they will always win, so that by suppressing women and gay men, men can stake a claim for their own manhood" (Kimmel, 1994: 134).

Not only gay men, but also immigrant men do suffer from the burden of failing to comply hegemonic masculinity. In their research on Mexican immigrant men, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Michael A. Messner found out that "marginalized and subordinated men, then, tend to overtly display exaggerated embodiments and verbalizations of masculinity that can be read as a desire to express power over others within a context of relative powerlessness" (1994: 214). They also suggest that "men of color, poor and working-class men, immigrant men, and gay men are often in very contradictory positions at the nexus of intersecting systems of domination and subordination. […] Although they are oppressed by class, race, and/or sexual systems of power, they also commonly construct and display forms of masculinity as ways of resisting other men's power over them, as well as asserting power and privilege over women" (1994: 215).

The following excerpts from the fieldwork illuminate the problem of hegemonic masculinity and denial of sexual orientation back in homeland. Ahmad is a gay Syrian whom I met 3 years ago in Istanbul. Although he refused his (gay) identity

in Syria, it was only much later when he came to Istanbul, he had to come to terms with it:

> "[…] I started to listen to heavy metal music. Because it was tough. It was tough as men should be. I was wearing black all the time. Because I thought any other color than black make men feminine which I should have refrained by all means. I dated some girls and I made up some stories like I was having sex with all these girls I dated. Honestly, I lied. […] I didn't even pass through the streets gay guys were usually hanging out. I was afraid to be gay. I was afraid to be known as gay. I am a tough guy who wears black and listens to heavy metal music. At least they saw that part of me and believed in the stories that I fool around with girls. I was not gay in Syria. Not at all!" (Ahmad, 25).

As the narrative of Ahmad in this particular context clearly shows manhood and being a 'real man' is extremely important for him. For him, being a real man simply means fitting in the expectations of the society, as he thinks it is associated with being tough and being sterile of the other colors which actually implies being sterile of femininity. This is not only unique to Ahmad's narrative. Most of the interviewees more or less disclosed similar anxieties about their masculinity. Tarek and Adel, for example, distinguish themselves from feminine-looking gays and how it is ok to be gay but without compromising your masculinity:

> "I'm gay. I'm out and proud to be gay. My family knows that I'm gay. We are all okay with it. Yet, I'm not sissy or faggot. I'm not feminine. And I do not like fems, I mean gay guys being feminine. Come on! You are a man. You should act like a man if you have a penis down there" (Tarek, 29).

> "I don't want to see when a man acts feminine. […] I don't like it when gay men do that kind of girly stuff. […] If you are a man, be a man. You don't have to be girly to be gay" (Adel, 35).

All three interviewees – Ahmad, Tarek, and Adel – are regular subscribers of gym centers and are well-built, masculine-mannered gay men. Especially Adel is a big supporter for his friends to start a membership to a gym center, because his ideal depiction of a man is a muscled one which implies that a man should be strong and not feminine looking. As he says:

> "For example, I think you (*referring to me*) should go to a gym. I believe every
>
> man should be muscled. It shows that that man is strong and… You know, he is like
>
> a man, not a boy or a girl."

As Connell (1998) suggests, Ahmad, Tarek, and Adel use their bodies as "arenas" or as a form of "hegemonic masculinity". Although these three men are self-identified gay men, which is excluded by the concept of hegemonic masculinity, they define and discipline their body in order to fit in the society's expectation through a male body. Being a 'real man' means to have a strong, disciplined body which is far from being girly, feminine, and weak. By making their body fit in socially constructed gender norms, they abstain from being 'sissy', or 'faggot' and climb one step up in the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity.

Being 'not feminine' is crucial for all my interviewees. Even though their manner is more feminine than masculine, in terms of social norms surrounding these two concepts, the interviewees claimed that they are masculine and insulted the other gay Syrians whom they thought are feminine.

Zaid is another example adopting this attitude of looking down on 'fem' gays. Although he is a young, feminine-mannered Syrian gay man himself, he does not want any feminine gay men around him. His gay identity is constantly evolving in Istanbul and being shaped vis-à-vis other gays but in line with the expectations of the society. As he states in his own words:

> "[…] I see some Syrian people in clubs doing belly dance. I don't like that. They
> are like women. […] One day I met this guy and he told me, 'Oh you talk too
> feminine, you do some movements with your hand when you talk, and it is like a
> woman'. No, I am not. That's how I talk and act. I don't do belly dance in clubs. It
> is feminine! I'm a masculine gay man, not a woman."

Zaid was afraid of being feminine and not being seen as "man enough". When he was confronted with the label of being feminine, he got angry and differentiated himself from the others whom he thought were more feminine. It is common for the men who are claiming to be masculine to exclude feminine-mannered men and placing them in a lesser hierarchy. Zaid, when he is labeled as feminine, excludes the ones who are doing belly dance in clubs and centers himself into a higher position than those.

Masculinity matters for the interviewees although they know that their sexual identity will always block them to achieve the ultimate hegemonic masculinity which seems to be the highest form of being a real man. Yet, as Connell's theorization of hegemonic masculinity suggests masculinities are heterogeneous, multiple and are not exempt from the flow of change. As mentioned earlier, codes of masculinity changes through time and place, so do ideals of masculinity of my interviewees.

After some time, I had another interview with Zaid. To my surprise, his manners – ways of acting, ways of talking and interacting with people gradually changed and even became more feminine. When I met him in a café, I realized that some of his friends referring him as "she" and "her". When I asked him if he wants to be called that way or if he is bothered, he answered that he was comfortable with his ways of acting and talking. He told me:

> "It is not like I am being a woman or something. But you know, I am in Istanbul
> and will go to Germany soon. I am not in Syria anymore and I don't want to

restrain myself and my body. I act in the way I like and I don't care if people think I am feminine or not. I met a lot of guys who are feminine and just fine. So am I! I am happy. They can call me whatever they want. She or he… They [his gay friends] are my *sisters*."

While Ahmad was wearing all black and listening to heavy metal, he admits that he has changed since he came to Turkey. He says that:

"In Syria, I did not have any gay friends. I did not want to be gay. Because being gay meant to be feminine. I came to Turkey and now, to be honest, I don't really care about being feminine or not. I just want to feel relaxed. I wear every color now, because even straight men wear pink in Turkey. […] And I live in Cihangir, I have friends who are straight and who are gay. I feel like I am accepted in my neighborhood and among my friends. […] Some people - Syrian or Turkish or other nationalities, after I meet them and they find out that I am gay, they are just surprised. They say they had no clue that I was gay. I just laugh. If I were still in Syria, I would be honored to know that I do not look like gay. But now, nothing. I feel nothing. Neither shame nor honor. Nothing. I think I was being over anxious about my sexuality before."

Tarek has also changed in terms of his ideas on masculinity. When I first met him, he was also complaining about feminine gay men in Tea and Talk sessions that SPOD was organizing on Sundays. During his time in Istanbul, he started joking about his own sexual identity by saying that he likes men a lot and that makes him a heterosexual woman. That kind of a joke about himself was far from being possible when I first met him.

Contradiction between masculinity and femininity reached its highest points in these Tea and Talk sessions. When I attended Tea and Talk sessions during the month of Ramadan, feminine mannered gay men were identifying themselves as bottoms and referring masculine

mannered gay men as their husband. That kind of contradiction between feminine mannered gay men and masculine mannered gay men stems from the cultural and educational background. Those who are feminine mannered and in search of a strong, masculine 'husband' are mostly from rural parts of Syria and most of them could not attend higher education. As Tarek claims:

> "Those feminine gays are ignorant. They think they are women just because they like bottoming during sex and they think because they are bottom they should act like women. That's why I also attend those sessions. To make them more aware of their sexual identity. You don't have to be a woman to be gay. But you know what? They have no formal education. They have not attended university, some of them did not even go to high school. All they know is Arabic websites and there's shitty information over there. And they learn how to act from the other ignorant gays like themselves."

Cultural and educational background determine and shape the forms of gay men identify themselves, interact with each other, and understand the social world around them. Those who come from urban areas of Syria and holds bachelor's degree tend to feel the anxiety of trying not to be feminine and struggle to fit in the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, on the other hand, those who come from rural areas of Syria and did not attend any higher education institution tend to identify themselves through their practice during sexual intercourse and behave accordingly and interact with their potential partner through the constructed heterosexual norms.

During the fieldwork, I have realized that those who have vehemently supported the idea that men should act like 'real men' and should protect their masculinity have eventually lowered their anxieties about their masculinity. They started to be more comfortable with their so-called feminine manners and feminine attributed characteristics, like talking in high pitch

voice, or referring themselves as she or her when they were joking around. Their new social and cultural environment changed their understanding on masculinity and on their sexual identity. Relatively strong LGBTI movement in Turkey and relatively visible LGBTI community in Istanbul with plural masculinities in the gay community help them reshape the ideals of Syrian gay men on masculinity and made them more comfortable with themselves.

Another respondent is clearly grateful about his time spent in Istanbul as a 'transit refugee', as it was the city he discovered and lived his gay identity in full. Now living in Norway, he told me that he still remembers Istanbul with fond memories rather than bad ones. Similar to his transient status as a refugee from Syria resettled in another country from Turkey, the way he rediscovered his gay identity in Istanbul is also reminiscent of "liminality"[38] (van Gennep, 1908; Turner, 1974) he went through as a gay man.

> "I am thankful that I was in Istanbul for a while. Although Egypt [the country that he lived before he moved in Istanbul] offered me a good environment in terms of gay socialization, Istanbul was the best place I've ever been. I learned not to care about my manners, my gestures, and my vocal's pitch. Because there are lots of different gay men in Istanbul and if you are in the right neighborhood, Istanbul welcomes you whatever you are. Now, I'm in Norway and I miss Istanbul a lot."
> (Nader, 28).

The masculinities theory is important here as it lays the foundations of power relations among Syrian gay men and the larger society. It depicts how immigrant gay men identify themselves, usually unconsciously, towards the multiple 'other(s)', i.e. other Syrian men and women, Turkish gay men, and even towards other Syrian gay and refugees who occupy the same space in Istanbul. Hegemonic masculinity is also helpful to understand that masculinities are heterogeneous, multiple and are constantly negotiated. As mentioned earlier, codes of masculinity changes through time and place, so do ideals of masculinity of my

interviewees. Other than masculinities theory, another effective tool for analysis is the social network theory as described below in detail.

5.2. Social Network Theory

Social networks "typically comprise family and friends, community organizations, and associations, and intermediaries such as labor recruiters and travel agents. […] Most attention has focused on family, friendship and community ties. A distinction is often made between 'personal' networks including family and friends, and those based on more distant relations, for example with co-ethnics or co-nationals who are not necessarily personally acquainted with potential migrants" (Koser and Pinkerton, 2002: 9-10). Khalid Koser divides migration process into three phases: pre-flight, flight, and exile. The pre-flight phase includes decision making process for migrants. Flight phase is connected with the choice of destinations by migrants, and exile phase covers the time of adaptation of migrants in host societies (1997: 594). These three phases and processes, determine the migration experiences and are closely related with formation of social networks. Social networks have a determinant role in pre-flight, flight, and exile phases, which is referred as the "asylum cycle" (Koser: 1997). There are three hypothesis developed by Ritchey (1976) concerning social networks and their relation to the decision for migration:

"**The affinity hypothesis** states that the higher the density of the network of friends and relatives in the origin society, the lower the probability of migration.

The information hypothesis focuses on the way that information about potential destinations, provided either by return migrants or by contacts abroad, can promote further migration.

The facilitating hypothesis focuses on how networks can facilitate migration, for example by lowering the cost of migration either directly through financial support or

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indirectly through lowering costs upon arrival in destinations" (quoted in Koser, 1997: 597).

According to Koser and Pinkerton (2002), by the help of these processes mentioned through hypotheses, social networks might have an influence on decision making in three primary ways. "First, social networks can influence migration selectivity – that is, who does and does not migrate. […] Second, social networks can influence migration timing. […] Finally, social networks can influence migration channeling – that is, the destination chosen by migrants. Put simply, migrants will tend to head for destinations where they already have established social networks. These networks can provide information before migration, and assist with finding a home or a job after migration" (10-11). **[SLIDE]**

However, social networks are not necessarily positive, but also may have some negative impacts on migration journey and experience. Sebnem Koser Akcapar, in her article about Iranian immigrants in Turkey, finds out that "although 'strong' ties, like relatives and close friends, assisted some respondents in their migration project by sending journey remittances and by providing legal assistance, 'weaker ties' established with Iranians whom they met in Turkey for the first time could be obstructive, oppressive, and exploitative (2009). In Turkey, many Iranian migrants confirmed that they were victims of their own community as there was disloyalty, deceit, lying, misguidance, and even sexual exploitation among the community. Most cases of rejected asylum seekers confessed that they distorted facts and lied about the reasons for emigration from Iran to the UNHCR officials, as a result of misguidance by one or more Iranian personal networks" (Koser Akcapar, 2009: 175). Therefore, social networks and the social capital that refugees can yield can be quite limited under certain conditions, especially if the resources are scarce and the stakes are high (Koser Akcapar, 2009). But refugees are also capable in finding other social networks that can prove to be

more beneficial for their onward journeys. These networks may consist of 'weaker' ties at first but in time with growing trust and solidary, they can take the form of 'stronger ties' (Koser Akcapar, 2009).

In the case of gay Syrian men, I realized most of them had to hide their identity even from their very close relatives, such as mothers, fathers, and siblings, in fear of in-group retribution and/or to avoid bringing shame to family due to their sexual orientation. But the new friends they have acquired in a safe social space created by local and international civil society actors, they feel more at ease and understood. Not only would they learn how to be themselves in such an environment, but also these new acquaintances assume the role of 'fictive kin'. Under the presence of this 'fictive kin', they come out openly as gay, they talk and discuss their problems, laugh and cry at the common problems they share. They also share the success stories of those who were able to reach the global North, seen as the 'paradise on earth' while being proud gay men.

While ideas on masculinity is changing in the new country and culture, the reason to migrate to one particular country depends on several factors, such as the life history of the migrant/refugee, motivations of his departure from homeland, and socio-political and economic situation of the destination country. As mentioned earlier, Ritchey (1976) developed three hypotheses concerning social networks and decision for migration, which are the affinity hypothesis, the information hypothesis, and the facilitating hypothesis, However, the situation of Syrian gay men cannot be explained by using only one of them, but a combination of three of these hypotheses might illuminate the importance of social networks during migration and the decision-making processes during their migration journey.

Nader is the one participant of the research who have travelled to more countries than the others. Although he wanted to come directly to Turkey, he could not because his father decided for him to go to Egypt first. The facilitating hypothesis explains this first destination

for Nader because he had a sister and brother-in-law in Cairo who can facilitate his life for a couple of months until he finds a job. Since the political atmosphere changed negatively for Nader and the other Syrians in Egypt after the military takeover, Nader had to go to Jordan unwillingly because his other sister was living there. Yet, after spending some time in Jordan, he decided to migrate to Turkey, although he did not have any family members, relatives, or friends in Turkey. He knew that Turkey was relatively a safe country for LGBTI people and he knew that Turkey offers a better life for gay men than Egypt and Jordan. Thus, depending on the information that he had before through his friends and his online search about gay scene in Istanbul made him convinced to migrate to Istanbul. Contrary to what facilitating hypotheses has to suggest, the third destination of Nader in his migration journey was not promoted and/or supported by relatives or family members, but decided mainly by the information that he gathered, which is better explained through the information hypothesis.

Not only Nader, but also the other participants of the study – whether willingly or unwillingly – chose Turkey either through facilitating factors or information factors or a combination of both. For example, Sami came to Istanbul with his family because they had their neighbors from Syria living in Istanbul after the war. Although Sami was dreaming about coming to Istanbul even when he was a child, the city was not his choice but his family's. However, after checking all his options in Istanbul, Sami took a decision separately from his parents who have no idea about his sexual orientation and he willingly chose to go to France by taking the resettlement option by the UNHCR. When I asked him why he chose France, he told me that France offers free university opportunities for Syrian refugees and it is considered a safe country for gay people. All these information – be it true or wrong – through relatives or acquaintances in the destination country can determine Syrian gay men's choice of a destination country. At the time of the interview, he was euphoric to be on his own to pursue

a better life there and not having to pretend anymore, but hoping to bring some of his family members to France after some time.

Unlike Sami, some respondents although initially stated they did not want to leave Turkey for another country finally decided to move on. The shifting desire from staying in Turkey to resettling into a new Western country has several reasons. As mentioned in the earlier chapters, Turkey does not provide a safe and secure environment for neither local queer community nor the Syrian one. Rising conservatism couple with xenophobia and homophobia which directly affect the lives of Syrian gay men, especially considering that they do not fit into mainstream gender roles and norms. Furthermore, they have to hide their gay identity from their families and other Syrian refugees. They usually live away from the neighborhoods that most Syrians live to overcome prejudice and scapegoating. Under these circumstances, most Syrian gay men decide to move to Western countries which they consider as a better opportunity and safer place for gay men. As the mobility among Syrian gay men is quite high, the Syrian gay community has in time transformed into rather a fluid and shrinking population. While some gays are leaving Istanbul already by taking the resettlement option, the remaining who do not wish to leave Turkey originally face the challenge of being a much smaller community with lessening social networks and support. Thus, they end up changing their minds and make plans to move further on. Also, the success stories from previous gay friends on top of the UNHCR's resettlement program offered to LGBTI under the vulnerability criteria paved the way for further migration.

Social networks do not only work towards determining the destination country and facilitating further migration, but also play a significant role for the unity and solidarity among Syrian gay men while they are still living in Turkey. Local NGOs for LGBTI people in Istanbul serve as perfect places for Syrian gay men to meet and establish a bond. Through these NGOs Syrian gay men learn which part of the city is safe for gay people, get to know

other Syrian gay men, and talk about their anxieties in a foreign country with the people who might have passed through similar experiences in Syria. Informal gatherings at the NGOs and after Tea and Talk sessions, they exchange phone numbers and extend a help in finding a job or an apartment. While they cannot mobilize their social capital among all Syrian nationals living as refugees (under temporary protection) in the country, they are more at an advantage to use their newly-acquired social capital among gay men. Even the process of determining neighborhood for themselves is supported by that social capital. While most of the Syrian population lives in Fatih, Esenyurt, and Başakşehir neighborhoods, Syrian gay men whom I met during the research have chosen Şişli, Beyoğlu, and Beşiktaş as their neighborhood. The latter neighborhoods are the ones that populated by secular locals and are more tolerant towards LGBTI people. The former neighborhoods are mostly populated by the more conservative locals and the Syrian people. Thus, Syrian gay men, by mobilizing the knowledge among themselves, choose the latter ones as their neighborhoods in order to be apart from the rest of Syrian community and to live in a more tolerant and comfortable environment. That way, they feel less pressure on themselves to hide their sexual orientation.

Although they feel less pressure in the neighborhoods that they have chosen to live, the only place they feel free of pressure and prejudice is Tea and Talk Sessions. During the sessions they were behaving in the way they want without the fear of being judged or despised. Those sessions offer even a fictive kinship among the participants. For example, participants were calling Ayman as "mother" because of his continuous support and advices to them. As mentioned earlier, Ayman is a well-educated and older Syrian gay man, his manners and advices matter to other Syrian gay men and puts Ayman into a position of a mother who should supposedly be concerned about and protective and supportive of her children, which are other participants of the session in this case.

Tea and Talk Sessions also pave the way for an environment where Syrian gay men can determine the future of their migration journey. That is to say that, gay men talk about and learn the ways how they can apply for resettlement and which countries they should choose in order to have a better life with various networks in the Western country that they are supposed to go. For example, Mike decided to go to the Netherlands during the conversations in those sessions, because he learned that the Netherlands is one of the first countries that preserved LGBTI rights before the law and also, several Syrian gay men chose that particular country to be resettled and they are happy about their decisions.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

June 30th, 2019. It was a shiny summer day in Istanbul, not different from the other days. People at Istiklal Street were wandering around and enjoying the sunny weekend. Although everything seemed as normal, one could distinguish unusual police clusters in each and every alley. June 30th was not as ordinary as it seemed, as it was the annual Gay Pride Parade day in Istanbul and the municipal government banned the parade due to security concerns four years in a row.

Tarek and I approached the crowd holding rainbow flags and banners who were gathered in a side street of Istiklal Street waiting for press release as the municipal government did not allow for the march, but only the press release. The crowd was cheerful and we enjoyed the atmosphere there. After the press release just while the crowd was dispersing, the police forces started to attack the crowd with tear gas and plastic bullets. We managed to find a safe way to get out of the crowd to go to a quiet neighborhood which is exempt from chaos. When we arrived in Cihangir, which is a close neighborhood to Istiklal Street and was safe and quiet at the time, we sat at a café in order to have a rest and chat. "What do you think," I asked to Tarek. "They did not allow us to march and just after the press release they attacked again." He was quiet, but he smiled when I asked the question. "*Habibi,*" he said. "We got used to it!."

The subject "we" did not refer to Syrian gay men, but to all LGBTI people living in Turkey. The answer he gave this time was quite surprising, because four years ago his answer was completely different. As mentioned at the Introduction part of this thesis, four years ago,

he was full of disappointment, sorrow, anger, and despair. Yet, today, after a long four years in Turkey, not only his viewpoint changed but also lives, expectations, and thoughts of Syrian gay men who participated into my fieldwork totally transformed. They left their home country because of the conflict back there, and came to Turkey supposedly for a brief period to wait until the war is over. However, once they understood that the situation was getting worse in Syria, they started a new life in a new country. Those who claimed initially that they would not leave Turkey for Europe even re-started brand new lives in other countries as well. Yet, the change was not happening solely in their migration status or in the country of residence . Unique experiences of forced migrants in every country in which they encounter a new culture, expose to new ideas and new life style while meeting new people shape their own agenda and future expectations. It also creates new social networks, which in turn impact their ways of thinking, adopt new manners and reshape their ideas on their sexual identities.

Syrian gay men who participated in this research illuminated that masculinity cannot be understood as a unique and unchangeable concept, but is multiple and up for change. As mentioned earlier, the time and place plays a significant role in the changes of the code of masculinities. While the gay participants were keen to save their masculine manners before they come to Turkey and during the first times of their arrival in Turkey, they have adapted their ideas on masculinity and manners in line with their new environment and ended up with being more comfortable with their sexual identity, with their so-called feminine manners, and with their ideas on how a 'man' should be and should behave. All these changes and adaptations also reshape the power relations that hegemonic masculinity implies on individuals. While being referred as a 'she' and 'her' was initially something inferior for most of the participants, they started using those words to define either themselves or other gay friends of theirs. Therefore, I suggest, breaking the walls of hegemonic masculinity through discovering multiple masculinities and being comfortable with the manners they have broken

existing power relations in gender that assumes feminine gay men and women as inferior. Getting rid of the idea of hegemonic masculinity even beats hidden self-directed homophobia which assumes gay men are inferior compared to heterosexual men.

Whether engaging with previous social networks they have established back in their home country or bonding brand new ones, social networks are one of the most important component leading to change on the idea on masculinities. Syrian gay men in Turkey contact with each other through social media, NGOs, online dating applications and they start to know each other and affect their ideas. This contact and establishment of social networks accelerates the process of adaptation to the new environment and the new culture. The networks they establish with local LGBTI people also influence and reshape their understanding of sexuality and gender-based power relations.

Disclosing social networks and its effects also falsifies the widespread prejudice which assumes refugees are passive victims who have no agency or will to determine their future. However, as life stories of Syrian gay men in this thesis illuminate, those people are neither passive nor victim. Through the use of social networks, and sometimes even through manipulating them, they make their voices heard, determine their future, and are capable of living the life they want. By using their agency and intensified contacts through their transnational social networks – including with those gay refugees in other countries, those living in Turkey and in the other Middle Eastern countries, they are able to get the resettlement option which is given to very few refugees under the 'vulnerable' criteria. In other words, they have the power and the will to shape their future.

In this thesis, I interviewed with 7 gay men either living in Istanbul or used to live in Istanbul before their resettlement to a third country in the Global North. Although my fieldwork and in-depth interviews is limited only to those 7 gay men, my analysis extends to a larger population through their friends with whom I met during my participant observation at

Tea and Talk sessions, cafes, and bars. As for future research, there is an urgent need to involve Syrian gay men who live in other cities than Istanbul. This would provide a better understanding on Syrian gay men and their experiences in Turkey. In addition to that, more Syrian gay men who are currently living in the West but used to live in Turkey should be interviewed to tell us their experiences. This would pave the way for more detailed analysis in migration and gender studies especially on social cohesion and integration and how their sexual identities continue to develop in different cultures. It will be through such research that we can only have a better understanding of being gay, refugee, and Syrian.

1 All names are pseudonyms in order to assure anonymity of the participants.

2 http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-police-crack-down-on-gay-pride-in-istanbul.aspx?
pageID=238&nID=84673&NewsCatID=339. Retrieved on March 15th, 2018.

3 https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention. Retrieved on June 19th,2019.

4 https://tgeu.org/transgender-day-of-visibility-2016-trans-murder-monitoring-update/
http://t24.com.tr/haber/turkiye-trans-cinayetlerinde-avrupada-birinci-dunyada-dokuzuncu,356613. Retrieved on May 28th,
2018.

5 http://narrative.ly/where-lgbtq-war-refugees-finally-feel-safe/. Retrieved on June 20th, 2018.

6 Muhammed Wisam Sankari was a Syrian gay man who were kidnapped and brutally murdered in Istanbul due to his
sexual orientation. His story is going to be mentioned in Chapter 4 under the section of "Media Coverage on Syrian LGBTI
People in Turkey".

7 https://t24.com.tr/haber/suleyman-soylu-bu-gune-kadar-76-bin-443-suriyeliye-vatandaslik-verdik,791996. Retrieved on
February 9th, 2019.

8 There were certain exceptions in the population exchange, such as Turks in Western Thrace and Rums in Istanbul and the
Eastern Thrace. Even the Karamanlis, who were Turkish speaking but belonging to Greek Orthodox church, were part of the
exchange populations (citation needed)

9 https://www.haberler.com/goc-ve-uyum-sempozyumu-10351765-haberi/ Retrieved on February 7th, 2019.

10 The information has been acquired from the following website on June 27, 2016:
http://www.unhcr.org/turkey/home.php?lang=en&content=559&page=79

11 https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/bakan-soylu-ulkesine-donen-suriyelilerin-sayisini-acikladi. Retrieved on February 7th,
2019.

12 LFIP: Law on Foreigners and International Protection.

13 http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik. Retrieved on February 7th, 2019.

14 The video can be watched through this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bp6grWsIJA Retrieved on July 10th,
2017.

15 http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/22/arts/ime-mr-gay-syria-documentary/index.html Retrieved on July 18th, 2017

16 http://www.milliyet.com.tr/istanbul-suriyeli-escinsellerin-gundem-2103246/ Retrieved on July 18th, 2017.

17 http://www.internethaber.com/suriyeli-escinseller-anlatti-foto-galerisi-1491947.htm?page=2 Retrieved on July 18th,
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19 http://www.diken.com.tr/suriyeli-escinsel-multeci-yenikapida-olu-bulundu-kimse-bizle-ilgilenmiyor-sira-hangimizde/ Retrieved July 18th, 2017.

20 http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-40378374 Retrieved on July 18th 2017.

21 http://gmag.com.tr/mr-gay-syria-asiri-islamcilara-meydan-okuyor/ Retrieved on July 18th 2017.

22 http://www.gazetevatan.com/demet-sarova-1043826-yazar-yazisi--mr-gay-syria-bir-baskaldiris-hikayesi-/ Retrieved on July 18th 2017.

23 http://www.kaosgl.org/sayfa.php?id=2154 Retrieved on July 18th, 2017.

24 "Yaşadığınız güzel şeyler dört duvar ve kapalı kapılar ardında kalıyor. Dışarı çıktığınızda birbirini tanımayan iki yabancı oluveriyorsunuz. […] Özgürce yaşamak! Bu bizim buralarda, bizim gibilere çok uzak ve yasak olan bir cümle."

25 Guidelines on International Protection: "Membership of a particular social group" within the context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. http://www.unhcr.org/3d58de2da.pdf Retrieved on July 22nd 2017.

26 ORAM: Organization for Refuge, Asylum, and Migration

27 https://www.buzzfeed.com/bradleysecker/syrian-couple-will-make-you-believe-in-love-again?utm_term=.bu9w6K29#.pkXw78gy Retirieved on August 27th, 2017; https://onedio.com/haber/sizi-gercek-askin-varligina-inandiracak-suriyeli-ciftin-etkileyici-hikayesi-731210 Retrieved on August 27th, 2017.

28 https://www.generosity.com/community-fundraising/tea-and-talk-group/ Retrieved on August 31, 2017.

29 Husband, in Arabic.

30 Darling, in Arabic.

31 You, in Arabic. *Inti* is used if the person is female.

32 You, in Arabic. *Inte* is used if the person is male.

33 Infidel, in Arabic.

34 Lut act refers to homosexual intercourse in Islamic sense. In the Qur'an, There are several verses mentions people of Lut who were incurred the wrath of Allah and vanished due to their deviant behaviours including homosexuality.

35 http://kaosgl.org/sayfa.php?id=22065. Retrieved on September 18th, 2017.

36 http://kaosgl.org/sayfa.php?id=24725. Retrieved on October 6th, 2017.

37 Go back to your country, in Turkish.

38 Liminality is a term coined by van Gennep (1908) and elaborated by Turner (1974) in analyzing *rites de passage* (quoted in Koser Akcapar and Simsek, 2018: 179). The liminal state of Syrian gay men refers to often vague, ever-changing and in-between phase between separation (leaving Syria and heterosexuality behind) and reincorporation (resettlement in a third country and acceptance of full sexual identity).

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