

Appendix

Statement from the Association of Bridging Peoples

It Is Not a Refugee Crisis, It Is a Secret War against Refugees

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Who We Are?

I am writing this statement on behalf of the Association of Bridging Peoples. Thus, it would be best to start by describing the association, which was set up in İzmir, Turkey, in 2014 to establish public solidarity and friendship between peoples based on the principles of equality, justice, and freedom. As a volunteer coalition, we consider ourselves a solidarity group rather than a nongovernmental organization. We do not hold back from politics because we do not separate life from politics, and we are on the side of life. We strive to build a public space for the politics of friendship, striving for a society free of hate, fear, isolation, conflict, and enmity toward one another. We work on a voluntary basis and believe in collective efforts without seeking parochial interests.

We have been working for and with refugees since Turkey, in general, and İzmir, in particular, have become major destinations for people escaping war and insecurities in their home countries. Our association includes a large health group consisting of nurses, midwives, dentists, healthcare workers, dietitians, psychologists, and doctors, including a field group that scans the streets and neighborhoods; a translation/interpretation group with

experts in Arabic, Kurdish, and Farsi; and an art and culture group that organizes events for adults and children. We have carried out a wide range of activities in different neighborhoods and with the participation of hundreds of volunteers. People from different professions and backgrounds contribute with their labor. Our volunteers also include musicians, actors, lawyers, teachers, students, workers, unemployed people, and, most importantly, refugees. We hold no executive committee meetings. Activities are organized and run through public meetings open to all. Membership is not a necessary condition for attending the public meetings. Everyone has equal voting rights—irrespective of membership status. People contribute what they can, without having to compromise on who or what they are. Since day one, we have never turned our back on any of the refugees who sought our help. We have met more than 150,000 refugees face-to-face and treated or helped to find treatment for more than 7,000 refugee patients.

The Association of Bridging Peoples is not in the business of preparing “projects” for the United Nations (UN) or the European Union (EU). We think the conventional “project” approach is conducive to quasi-professionalism and undermines the spirit of voluntary work. Voluntary work enables us to escape the trap of market relations and protects us against the degeneration of our labor into a market good. We do not accept any monetary donations from any state(s) or national or international institution. We value our independence and the capacity to question shared wisdom. We carry out our mission supported by small voluntary donations and membership fees.

We believe in solidarity—not in charity. In fact, we think charity is dysfunctional because it is momentary, and its reach is person specific. Charity creates a culture of dependency conditional on the will of the wealthy and powerful. The equitable dispensing of charitable donations may not be taken for granted. Financial support cannot substitute for collective social, economic, and political responsibilities or for the public good. Charity can only have a complementary function. Therefore, we have always called on the government and its officials to carry out their duties. For each work field and health intervention, we have written detailed reports and submitted them to the governor’s office, health directorates, and public health directorates. We have produced the information of the streets, informed the public, and democratized the production and dissemination of information.

Solidarity corresponds to rights-based struggles. It is not limited to the provision of healthcare, food, or clothing. It is based on community objectives, specifically regarding refugees, and acting together with them. Solidarity precludes conceptions of the refugees as helpless victims and requires support for their united voices and political entitlements. It involves participation in the fight they lead for their just rights. It precludes incorporation

into the state(s)' vertical politics of command. It means questioning the political consequences of state actions. We embrace solidarity as the “politeness of the oppressed” and as the oldest and most precious institution of humanity.

The West and the Rest—Reasons of Migrations

Besides, from the military interventions in the Middle East, the economic and political understanding that we call “the West and the rest” is the main reason for the chaos and the violence in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Neoliberalism has seriously boosted inequality between the North and the South, which has caused fragile social structures in the Global South. A significant number of people from all around the world, especially from war-torn regions, are looking for a new life because of desperate structural problems. The main reasons for the migration movements in the world today directly relate to global economic powers, political pressures, economic marginalization, discrimination, and the ugly face of globalization. The globalization that makes capital and commodities transcend all the borders does not offer equal opportunity for either the refugees or the migrants. European countries, such as Turkey, criminalize refugees and militarize borders, yet they have a vested interest in their open-air prison system for these people. It was the Western intervention in Libya that threw the country into chaos. It was the US attack on Iraq that created the conditions for the rise of Islamic State. The ongoing civil war in the Central African Republic between the Christian south and the Muslim north was not just an explosion of ethnic hatred; it was triggered by the discovery of oil in the north: France and China fight for the control of resources through their proxies. It is necessary to understand that the first reason for the recent refugee issue lies in the fact that the current turbulent, violent, and unstable context in Africa and the Middle East has brought together migrants and refugees from different origins, all seeking a better life in Europe. Perceiving refugees as a threat to security initiated the European anti-migration policies, such as criminalizing refugees, militarizing the borders, and transferring refugees to subcontractors, that have been prevailing for years. The main reason for the rise of boat incidents and the dead bodies washing ashore are the migration policies of the EU. Europe asks Turkey to ban the crossings to Europe, to keep the refugees in Turkey, and to protect “the Fortress of Europe”; the plan is to turn Turkey into an open-air prison for refugees.

We, the Association of Bridging Peoples, do not define the situation as a “refugee crisis” per se in our position papers. Identifying the situation as a singular identity crisis hinders a critical comprehensive analysis and the establishment of a rational ethical position. We approach the situation as a humanitarian, political, historical, and economic crisis.

Migration of Syrians

Since April 2011, approximately seven million Syrians have been forced to migrate, and almost four million came to Turkey because of the civil war, which was intensified by intervention of several states. The Syrian uprising followed a range of uprisings in the Arab world. We witnessed the process of the uprising turn into a proxy war with sectarian overtones. The People of Syria are not defeated in Syria and eventually forced into massive migration; instead, the People of Syria are defeated in Washington, Paris, Riyadh, Ankara, Doha, etc., in the competitive nature of the power struggles of the international system to secure the markets, possess energy and resources, control energy, and continue the “realization-evaluation” cycle in the military industry.

In 2016, the Aegean Sea became the passageway used by human smugglers to transport nearly one million people from Turkey to Europe. This crossing resulted in thousands of deaths on irregular migration routes. The main reason for the rise of boat accidents and the dead bodies washing ashore indirectly relates to the migration policies of the European Countries and the European Union. Within the EU, emerging political responses to the problem have been crafted largely on national rather than union perspectives.

The main concern in European countries has been keeping the influx of migrants under control. Nearly all governments in Europe have built long razor-edged fences along the borders and forced the refugees to change their route, intensifying their attempts to reach the Eastern Aegean Islands. In Europe, right-wing groups have emerged in opposition to migration, and many forces are exploiting this hostile mood.

The responses and responsibilities of the neighboring countries were disappointing as well. In July 2015, Turkey’s open-door policy started to change, and finally, Turkey closed the borders as well and built a long wall on its Syrian border. Now, although the war is still going on, Syrians are no longer allowed to migrate to Turkey.

Turkey has 4.5 million refugees, of which 4 million are Syrians. Only 10 percent of Syrians are living in 25 refugee camps located in 10 Turkish provinces close to the border region with Syria. Other Syrians, scattered in other parts of Turkey, are struggling daily with their own resources by begging for food, finding employment in the informal and temporary job sector, or getting social aid.

Turkey refuses to grant legal refugee status to refugees from outside Europe, thereby depriving them of the rights and benefits they would otherwise have as registered refugees. The treatment of refugees as “guests” and the new national legal framework, “temporary protection,” offer the government great flexibility and freedom of action. Syrians living in Tur-

key are considered “guests” with temporary protection status and a lack of permanent residence permits. Turkey’s approach to the problem has always been charity based rather than rights based. The management of Syrians in Turkey is based on ideological and political reasons and on the faulty assumption that their stay in Turkey would be of a short duration (three months!). However, due to the uncontrollable dimension of the mass inflow and the absence of a strong infrastructure in the Turkish asylum system to deal with it, all politics related to Syrian refugees has failed. Because of the number of Syrian refugees, Turkey has been greatly affected in terms of not only foreign affairs but also domestic issues.

Turkey is giving neither Syrians nor other refugees official refugee status; thus, it is not a safe country for them. They are not under the cover of international law in Turkey without an official refugee status. Those who enjoyed temporary protection are not allowed to apply for individual refugee status determination, so they do not have any chance to be resettled in a third country by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the same way as other non-European refugees do. This accords unlimited freedom to the Turkish government to make decisions concerning the lives and future of four million Syrian refugees. If the government decides that they constitute a risk to the security of the country or a threat to public order, the refugees can and will be deported.

What Should Turkey Do?

The simplest fact is that millions of people flee their countries and lose their rights based on national citizenship, and thus, as refugees, they struggle to survive in a foreign country where they are deprived of basic rights, including the right to citizenship. In this regard, the people in the host nations, as they welcome refugees and migrants, should adopt an unconditional and ethical approach that goes beyond the conjectural needs of nation-state or limitations of international hegemonic powers and institutions.

We, the Association of Bridging Peoples, express our desire to establish a relationship with the oppressed, refugees, and migrants who are marginalized above and beyond the legalistic and institutional view of the world. By doing so, we open a pathway to protest injustice and exploitation in pursuit of human rights. The Association of Bridging Peoples says “Welcome” unconditionally to all refugees and migrants, without any ifs, ands, or buts!

The “right to rights” for these people who are stripped of all basic rights upholds their right to exist without being pushed around or absorbed by dominant politics and powers. It is in fact a right to self-determination and political existence. No government should be allowed to strip the refugees of

their political rights and take away their national identities as their own political subjects. We believe that being a political subject begins with having the right to self-determination of one's own life. This right can be achieved internationally if political subjects receive their rights to full refugee status and access to citizenship in the host nations. Without hesitation, we demand the granting of refugee status and the right to citizenship to all refugees and migrants in Turkey.

For these reasons, we should remember the conditions in which foreigners live in Turkey and the fact that Syrians are not the only ones who are deprived of citizenship rights. Foreigners in Turkey come from many countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Bangladesh, and Georgia. Even before the Syrian refugees arrived, all of these people have been exploited in the labor market without any rights and protection. They have been living on the streets in Turkey with neither recognized visibility as humans nor the status of refugees.

While capitalism and capitalist nation-states continue to produce the conditions, which provoke cross-country migrations, migrants themselves continue to be used as cheap and "flexible" labor for increasing profits. When the core capitalist states' cheap labor markets have been saturated, late capitalist states, like China, India, and Turkey, have opened their economies to cheap migrant labor. Turkey has accommodated over one hundred thousand migrant workers in the last twenty years. Just like core capitalist states, Turkey has intentionally accepted many irregular/undocumented migrant workers and fed its growing economy with their cheap and flexible labor power. It is believed that almost one million foreign workers are underpaid and without any insurance or union support in various industries, including textile production and mining, agriculture and construction, tourism and entertainment (including the sex industry), domestic work, and elder care. Owners of small and medium-sized businesses are especially happy with this new army of slaves of global capitalism. By not paying the minimum wage, by employing underpaid, undocumented, and unprotected migrant workers, such companies make extra profits.

Based on these facts, we challenge those who view the Syrian workers as the cause of low wages, unemployment, and poverty. Employers forced Turkish workers to endure exploitative working conditions long before the Syrians arrived. For these reasons, our call for the right to citizenship is not just for Syrians but also for all migrants in Turkey. We recognize that social, political, and economic injustices have created the systemic and structural exploitation of human life. As part of the international framework of rights, we demand the granting of full refugee status to all migrants and refugees and the banishment of segregation between citizens and foreigners, and we demand that all migrants be granted the right to citizenship.

The Right to Citizenship and Discrimination

We reject the conditions and criteria put forward for granting citizenship, such as skills, education, and economic status. These are elements of class-based discrimination. Those most oppressed require the most protection. We stand in solidarity with the poor, the women, and the children. It is those neglected children missing their vaccinations and all types of healthcare, the exploited Syrian child workers laboring ten to twelve hours a day, the underpaid seasonal farm workers, the exploited “Syrian brides” married to Turkish men as second wives, the sick and elderly, and the Syrian LGBTI members who most deserve the right to citizenship.

Our call for the right to citizenship is not a glorification of the nation-state or the borders that encircle it. On the contrary, we call for people fleeing wars and economic conditions to do so knowing “no borders.” We also stand with the continued hope of refugees to return to their own countries. We stand in solidarity with their claim and their fight for their freedom and existence on their own land. We define the nation as a collective of people willing to live together in an enriched society of diversity rather than enforced singularity. Our call for citizenship is not about glorifying nationalism here but about fostering a world that supports human rights for all people.

We call on the refugees: if you want to become an equal part of this nation, we stand in support with your demands and your right to live here.

At this point, we call on all asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants on this land: we defend your right for free, safe passage to this country. In accordance with your wishes, we demand the right to citizenship. We do not see citizenship as a form of social integration that swallows and eliminates you or your identity, uses you for economic exploitation, or categorizes you based on your background, nationality, religion, or ethnicity in the name of social engineering projects. We see you as our partners in the struggle for a new society of democracy, freedom, and equality. With the hope of knowing and understanding “one and all,” we say “Welcome” to people of all nations.

We were all foreigners at some stage, and in the future we could be foreigners in another country. That we were born on this land does not make us its owners. All land is for all people. Hence, real hospitality is about internationalism. The fight for internationalism will transform and change us all.

Utopian positions are also forces that change reality. In fact, we require this utopia as much as you do to be and stay human. We need this equity for a democratic world and a democratic nation-state.

By rejecting the definition of citizenship as being part of national identity, we also reject the ethnic and religious totalitarianism of nation-states. Instead, we see nations as a political form that intends for us to live together in a diverse society that welcomes the newcomers. “Civilization” began with settlement. By taking away people’s rights to settle down, you take

away their humanity. A nation is a collective of people settled together. Newcomers are not a danger or a threat to the nation but rather a cultural enrichment.

Conclusion

Migration is a major social issue of our times. Migrants are and continue to be important political actors of the future.

In addition, many movements of social solidarity with migrants/refugees are occurring all around the world. Despite Europe's policy toward migrants, people of various countries, from Greece to Germany, have seriously and unexpectedly supported and aided refugees in crossing the borders. The anti-migrant wave in Europe is not a new phenomenon. Solidarity of the people and the peoples' friendships will be an obstacle toward the antimigrant atmosphere in Europe that causes fascist organizations to grow.

The existing conditions of today, with migrants risking their lives to seek protection, makes the EU asylum system unsustainable. Instead of signing new readmission agreements with other countries, the EU should focus on preventing the desperation that leads to suffering and avoidable deaths.

The EU-Turkey "Readmission Agreement" should be abrogated: refugees must not be returned to the countries where they might face persecution.

European and other countries, especially those who are militarily active in the Middle East, should take responsibility for the refugees as much as the neighboring countries.

Providing political prerogatives and financial aid to countries such as Turkey for keeping refugees away from Europe should be halted.

Legal and safe passage should be ensured to those who want to go to Europe.

Anti-immigrant border policies that cause deaths and human rights violations should be denounced.

As a good role model for other countries, Turkey should go back to its "open-door policy"; subsequently, the deal to send migrants back to Turkey or refugees back to their countries should not be accepted, as fear of persecution for political or religious beliefs exists for these people.

Our Concluding Statements to the Turkish Government

All migrants, refugees, and foreigners, including Syrians, should be given full refugee status.

All willing migrants, irrelevant of their class, ethnicity, or religion and without any discrimination, should be given the right to citizenship.

Turkey should not turn into a refugee prison to please the EU. All refugees willing to go to other countries should be allowed to do so.

Syrians should not be systematically discouraged from hoping to return to their homeland in the future.

The future of millions of people in the region, including people in Syria and Turkey, depends on Turkey's politics and policies to be humanitarian, realist, pluralist, and democratic.

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