

# Aspiring Cosmopolitans

## Syrian Youth in Urban Turkey

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### Introduction

[In Istanbul] you feel that you are part of a society that is very similar to you but also way more advanced and developed and open to the rest of the world. This was not available in our country, we were closed in our country. . . . We used to not know what was happening outside our society in Aleppo. Here, you live in comfort and you see what's happening outside while also engaging with this development. You are engaging with all of it, technology, development, the idea that you can develop yourself, this country doesn't stop you.

–Rawda, 31 years old, originally from Aleppo

Over the course of a decade, almost four million Syrian refugees have fled in waves into neighbouring Turkey, altering the texture of urban life in that country. This chapter explores the relationship between urban belonging and national belonging, and particularly the ways that Syrian youth in Istanbul express cosmopolitan aspirations that they imagine realizing in Turkey's cities. The chapter builds on an anthropological literature regarding cosmopolitanism in unlikely places, such as slums in Alexandria (Schielke 2015) or hip-hop barbershops in Tanzania (Weiss 2002, 2009). Cosmopolitanism, in this literature, 'is about aspiring to the world, a sense of there being a wider array of paths, possibilities, styles and aims "out there"' (Schielke 2012: 29). While youth in marginalized spaces often imagine fulfilling their cosmopolitan dreams in 'the Outside' (Elliott 2021), and many such youth in the

Middle East and Africa have focused on Europe as the space to realize such dreams, this chapter shows how many displaced Syrian youth have begun to view Turkey's cities as spaces of vernacular cosmopolitan aspirations.

Following the 2015 wave of mass migrations towards Europe, public discourse in most EU countries has tended to assume that Syrians are only held back from migrating west by the 2016 EU–Turkey deal, discussed more below. Indeed, Turkish President Erdoğan has also employed such perceptions, threatening to ‘open the gates’ and allow Syrians to leave towards Europe if certain conditions are not met. Recent research in Turkey, however, has converged on quite a different finding: that as time passes, European futures have become less desirable (e.g. Düvell 2019 Erdoğan 2017a, 2017b).<sup>1</sup>

The majority of Syrians in Turkey today express a desire to remain in the country, and this number is especially high for the Syrian youth in our study. This chapter shows why Syrian youth may view Turkey as a space of possibility, a place to try out different selves and imagine cosmopolitan lives. We argue that in the case of large numbers of Syrian refugees who have now spent almost a decade in Turkey, the urban landscape becomes a space to rehearse and feel belonging in a country that in many ways continues to disenfranchise them.

Syrians are refashioning Turkey's urban fabric, and especially that of the global city of Istanbul. Despite the city's cosmopolitan character, older residents now complain that it is no longer ‘Turkish’. Syrian neighbourhoods and market areas have sprung up to cater to Syrian tastes and to create what one popular newspaper article called ‘Aleppo in exile’ (BBC 2013). Indeed, it is not coincidental that the largest numbers of displaced Syrians in these cities derive from the Aleppo district of north-west Syria. Previous research has also shown that perceived similarities between Istanbul and Aleppo, in particular, give many Syrians today living in Turkey's metropolis a sense of belonging there (esp. Kaya 2017a; Rottman and Kaya 2020). Many of our interlocutors noted this, including Rawda, quoted in the epigraph, who observed,

In a very strange way, my sense of belonging to my country changed to this country [after living in Istanbul]. I am actually surprised by this, I didn't think my sense of belonging would change so quickly. . . . The culture is very similar. Hearing the azan, seeing Islam, seeing the hijab. Because of these things they don't look at you like you are a stranger because it's a very similar culture. This all helps me feel a sense of belonging. . . . Now, when I visit somewhere else, when I come back and smell Istanbul's air, I feel relaxed.

Like so many young people whom we interviewed, Rawda noted similarities with Aleppo, echoing the observations of Rottman and Kaya's interlocutors.

While the similarities with Aleppo made Istanbul familiar, however, it was actually Istanbul's differences from her native city that increased Rawda's sense of belonging there. ‘Here, you live in comfort and you see what's

happening outside’, she remarked. ‘You are engaging with all of it, technology, development, the idea that you can develop yourself.’ Indeed, our research indicates that for many Syrians in the transitional period of youth, feeling at home in exile is not only about reproducing familiar lifestyles, but is also about a newfound sense of mobility that is both spatial and temporal. This is mobility as moving forward, a sense of progress and possibilities that concentrates on the future rather than the past. Youth that we interviewed often expressed this sense of both familiarity and ‘progress’ through the trope of Istanbul being on the cusp between ‘East’ and ‘West’. As Rawda expressed it, ‘The mix between East and West gives you a lovely and comfortable feeling. All this gives you a sense of belonging in the city’.

This sense of urban belonging, we will show, translates for many Syrians into imaginations of futures in Turkey. While similarities to the spaces where they lived in the past are important, our focus here is on how the affordances of the urban environment in Turkey open up new potential futures. In particular, we show how many young Syrians in Turkey have begun to imagine themselves as cosmopolitan, putting emphasis on mobility not as a way to move elsewhere but as an aspiration in its own right and a part of what it means to live ‘normal lives’.

The chapter, then, first discusses literature on cosmopolitan aspirations, the affordances of the urban environment and future-making in relation to Syrian refugees in urban Turkey. We then turn to the particular urban context of Istanbul and the possibilities afforded by its cosmopolitan environment. Our analysis is based on fifteen life history interviews conducted with displaced Syrian youths from a range of socio-economic backgrounds now living in various districts around Istanbul (mainly Üsküdar, Fatih, Ensenler, Beyoğlu and Başakşehir), as well as on results of a three-year research project on Syrian youth in five Turkish cities, for which Bryant was co-principal investigator.<sup>2</sup> Participants were selected through snowball sampling while Habash was conducting ten months of ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian migrants in Istanbul from September 2020 to August 2021.<sup>3</sup> In our analysis, we show the relationship between, on the one hand, the affordances of technology and potentiality within the context of urban Turkey, and, on the other, refugees’ senses of belonging in the country. In particular, we show how the global emerges as a discourse within which young Syrians become aspiring cosmopolitans in the Turkish urban landscape.

## **On Aspirational Cosmopolitanism and the Affordances of the City**

Turkey currently hosts more Syrian refugees than any country in the world, and they are mostly settled in Turkey’s urban areas. At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, in 2011, then-prime minister Erdoğan announced an open-

door policy for Syrians fleeing the violence and at the end of the year gave them Temporary Protection status. The Turkish government called Syrians ‘guests’ (*misafir*), an intentional use of a normatively laden term to suggest both that they would ultimately leave and also that Turks should display hospitality towards them (Orhun and Şenyücel Gündoğar 2015). This linguistic play was also in line with Turkey’s signature of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which at the time of signing promised asylum only to refugees fleeing Europe in the wake of the Second World War. While initially the influx from the Syrian conflict was minimal, the 2012 breakdown of a ceasefire in that country suddenly increased the refugee flow to more than one hundred thousand.

Although the Turkish government tried to encourage settlement in refugee camps, otherwise known as Temporary Protection Centres, many refugees instead followed networks of relatives, friends and trading partners to cities or moved independently to urban areas to find work. Fluctuations in the Syrian conflict meant that by the end of 2014, Turkey was hosting more than one million Syrian refugees, and by the end of 2015 more than two million. The twenty-five camps coordinated by the Ministry of Disaster and Emergency Management (AFAD) accommodated only around 250,000, or about 10 per cent of the country’s Syrian population, at the end of 2015.

That year was a turning point in the history of the Eastern Mediterranean and the lives of Syrians trying to escape violence, as conditions in Turkey pushed many towards Europe. Television and computer screens filled with images of desperate migrants braving choppy seas in dinghies. While the loss of life during this period was significant,<sup>4</sup> the discourse of a so-called ‘refugee crisis’ that emerged in the period was less about the fate of the migrants themselves than about the crises of politics and legitimacy that shook receiving states in Europe (Hafez 2014; Pickel and Öztürk 2021). The result of that political crisis was the 2016 EU–Turkey deal, in which the EU promised EUR 6 billion to Turkey to aid refugee settlement and integration and to stem the migrant flow. At the same time, the deal produced the impression that Europe was the world’s destination and that only the most stringent measures would stop the continent from being overrun. Certainly, much of the media of the period and afterwards produced the impression that Syrians’ aspirations are oriented firmly towards Europe.

The majority of those who attempted that dangerous journey to Europe were young people. The first survey conducted with arriving migrants in Germany showed that of the almost one thousand Syrian refugees interviewed, most were young males, more than 90 per cent of whom said that armed fighting in Syria was a threat to their safety and that they feared conscription or kidnapping by one of the various organizations involved in the fighting (Ragab et al. 2017). Moreover, in 2019, 46.4 per cent of the registered Syrian population in Turkey was under 18 (Erdoğan 2020: 7), while

as of June 2020 this figure had risen to 46.8 per cent, and the percentage of youth between 18 and 30 stood at 23.5 per cent. This means that as of mid-2020 more than 70 per cent of the Syrian population in Turkey was under the age of 30.

Our research has focused on youth primarily because this is the age category that has been caught in between, stuck in the limbo of ‘permanent temporariness’ precisely at a transitional time of their lives. Youth between 18 and 30 years of age would have attended university or entered the job market in their home country, but many are finding that their plans for education and training, or marrying and building a family, must be deferred or altered. Many young people described to us the circuitous routes that they had to take to enter university, or the compromises they made in choosing other professions, such as one young man who had wanted to study but instead became a real estate broker. Others bide their time in menial jobs but pursue their ambitions through research on the internet and occasional courses. All talked about the importance of their families to the decisions that they made. Moreover, opportunities for youth often determine decisions that families make, as they calculate the best options for the family unit.

Despite the importance of this age category, however, research focused specifically on refugee youth and their experiences and needs is sparse (for similar observations, see Chatty 2007). Some limited research has addressed migrant youth perceptions of time and the future (e.g. Allsopp et al. 2014; Andersson 2014), especially in relation to immigration regimes. Other qualitative research has examined youth agency, particularly the experience of illegality or lack of documentation in the transition to adulthood (esp. Gonzales 2011). However, the experience of stalled temporality, an impeded transition to adulthood and the impediments of immigration regimes experienced so keenly by many refugee youth is an area still in need of much qualitative research.

Moreover, much of the ‘stuckness’ or existential immobility (Hage 2009) that refugee youth in Turkey experience arises from their legal and social status as ‘temporary’ refugees. Turkey’s Temporary Protection Regulation (*Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği*) of October 2014 ensured that asylum seekers would not be returned against their will and gave them access to fundamental rights and services, such as healthcare and education.<sup>5</sup> This temporary status has provided Syrians in the country with basic rights such as access to health, education and social assistance, but refugees continue to face challenges in access to those rights. Moreover, while even as early as 2015 many polls reported large numbers of Syrians preferring to stay in Turkey, the regime of temporary protection offered few obvious pathways to citizenship and permanence.

As we know from other cases of prolonged displacement, however, war rarely creates refugees who are ‘temporary’. Rather, throughout the world,

from Afghanistan to Georgia to Uganda, we find millions of persons left in the limbo of ‘permanent temporariness’ (e.g. Dunn 2018; Weber and Peek 2012), often held for decades in the squalor of camps while unable fully to plan for the future (Harrell-Bond 1989). Even in cases where forced migrants return to their homes, as in Bosnia or Rwanda, return is often prolonged, painful and may entail secondary displacement (e.g. Blitz 2005; Stefansson 2010). In cases of ethnic or secessionist conflict, we see that while return may remain an ideal, the likelihood of return in IDPs’ lifetimes is slim. In the Syrian case, while a regime change could open the door to return, changing work and educational opportunities and life circumstances invariably shift such views as time passes. As Roger Zetter (2021: 9) notes, among the UNHCR options of resettlement, repatriation or local integration for refugees, return is the ‘not-so-easy’ option, a ‘contested territory figuratively and in practice’ (ibid.: 10). Rather, Zetter observes, exile is transformative (ibid.: 13). Anthropological studies of war, as well, have emphasized that it is important to see conflict not only as an exceptional eruption in the present, but also as a transformative social process (esp. Lubkemann 2008; also Kelly 2008). We suggest that the imaginations of youth are key to this process.

In a recent book (Bryant and Knight 2019), Bryant and coauthor outline methods for ethnographic study of the future, in particular by encouraging attention to ‘orientations’, or the open-ended and indeterminate ways in which we orient ourselves to the future in everyday life. ‘While orientations entail planning, hoping for, and imagining the future, they also often entail the collapse or exhaustion of those efforts: moments in which hope may turn to apathy, frustrated planning to disillusion, and imagination to fatigue’ (ibid.: 19). Importantly, anthropological studies of even what seem to be hopeless or ‘futureless’ presents show how people nevertheless plan, long and hope for particular kinds of futures (e.g. Bear et al. 2015; Dzenovska 2018; Hage 2009; Jansen 2014, 2015; Kelly 2008).

In this regard, while many of the refugee youth whom we interviewed consider their state to be ‘abnormal’, they do not necessarily subscribe to the idea that ‘normalcy’ implies returning to their ‘normal’ state prior to war. Rather, as we show below, they are constructing new visions of a ‘normal life’ from the affordances of urban landscapes in Turkey. As Schielke (2012: 31) notes for youth in Egypt, ‘The global class difference between the fantastic world of possibilities – be it Europe, America and the Gulf or the upper class milieus in Egypt – and the everyday world of limited means is marked by the difference in the material qualities of surfaces, dress, vehicles, media, pavement, fashion brands, or sports’. It is this ‘Westernness’ or globality that many of the youth in our study said that they found in Turkish cities, which they viewed as ‘open’ in contrast to the closed lives they claimed to have led before. In a similar way, ethnographic work from the post-Yugoslav Balkans, for instance, has shown how a situation of pervasive corruption

and political uncertainty produces longings for ‘normal lives’ that are often measured through markers such as consumer items (Fehérváry 2002), passports (Jansen 2009) and having a state that works (Gilbert et al. 2008; Greenberg 2011).

Indeed, research shows that for many youth who are today intensely connected to the world through technology and who share transnational images of what constitute the material aspirations of a ‘normal’ life, luxury villas with new cars parked outside are often not only about material comfort, but also about creating themselves as the sorts of persons who should live in those spaces (Elliott 2021; Elsayed 2010). Fehérváry (2002), for instance, shows how postsocialist Hungarian aspirations to possess particular consumer goods were not only about their possession, but also about attaining social respectability through ‘becoming modern’. ‘The pressure to transform personal material worlds goes beyond local class positioning’, Fehérváry notes. ‘It stems from the correlation between “upscale” material environments and a level of belonging in an imagined international order’ (ibid.: 394).

As will become clear below, the realization of such aspirations also depends on spaces in which they can be realized. Many Syrian youth in Turkey’s urban environments today see the possibility of fulfilling such aspirations, and indeed can imagine lives in which they can ‘become modern’ while retaining their own culture. However, these futures that many young Syrians are envisioning are increasingly at odds with public opinion in Turkey, which has become virulently anti-migrant. The next section, then, explores how young Syrians engage in future-making practices that create senses of belonging in a state that increasingly rejects them.

## Cultural Affinity and Belonging

Not surprisingly, as documented in other studies of Syrian integration in Turkey (Kaya 2017a, 2017b; Rottman and Kaya 2020), most Syrians we spoke to mentioned that one of Turkey’s major attractions was the cultural similarities between Turks and Syrians, what Kaya (2017a) calls ‘cultural affinity’. As Rawda explained, ‘Istanbul is close to us culturally, close to our society, close to our way of living. You don’t feel yourself a foreigner in it . . . All this gives you a sense of belonging in the city.’ Kaya (2017a, 2017b) discusses the historical reasons for this cultural closeness, mainly the traces of the Ottoman Empire in the region. Given that the Ottoman Turks controlled the Levant for nearly four centuries between 1516 and 1918, the people of greater Syria absorbed various Ottoman traditions and vice versa (Ahmad 2003). This is especially true of culinary, musical and religious culture.

Because the Turkish language uses numerous Arabic words even today, this effect is also felt linguistically. Quite a few of the Syrian youth we encountered had by the time of our interviews spent more than five years in Turkey and now spoke Turkish fluently, while others were working to learn. Of those who were fluent speakers, many claimed that the language was easy to learn because of the heavy use of Arabic in Turkish vocabulary. Even without fluent Turkish, ‘you can get around and do what you need to do because of the same Arabic words that are used in Turkish . . . You can still communicate with them in the stores wherever you go’, explained Rawda. Interestingly, some interviewees discussed a deeper layer of cultural affinity beyond similar vocabulary. For instance, Abdullah, a young man in his mid-twenties who left Aleppo in 2016 and now lives in a flat with a group of Syrian friends on the European side close to the Golden Horn, claimed that even the ‘stubborn’ nature of ‘Turkish people’ resembles that of Syrians:

The *tabee’a* [environment] and the people are very similar to us . . . the weddings, the way they [Turks] think, these sorts of things. Especially us in Halab, we have lots of people who share similar ways of thinking with Turks . . . sometimes the similarities are like *tafkeer mahdood* [stubbornness], sometimes bureaucratic thinking, sometimes *mikh al-tiraji* [entrepreneurial thinking]. We have these things a lot [in Halab]. This behaviour is not strange for us. (Abdullah, 28 years old, originally from Aleppo)

These cultural similarities have helped Syrians connect to their host communities, feeling tied to their new country of residence on account of the shared history – however distant this history might be in reality. As Rottman and Kaya (2020: 5) note, ‘this cultural intimacy is built in part by asserting difference from Europeans’. The urban landscape is an important place in which this cultural intimacy is made tangible, through familiar sounds, such as music and the call to prayer; familiar sights, such as minarets and women wearing the hijab; and familiar tastes and smells in the form of food, drink and other aspects of daily and ritual life. These tangible signs, and the ways of life associated with them, were often negatively contrasted with the experience in Europe among interviewees in Bryant’s project on Syrian youth. As one young woman from Der Zor who was 23 years old and studying in Antakya at the time of the interview noted,

There are those who are in Germany or Sweden, but my dad, when he came to Turkey, he found that its culture is close to Syria, at least they have some of the Islamic aspects, you hear the azan, there are covered women. So their traditions and habits are somehow similar to ours. For example, dad didn’t like living outside, in any European country, and I kind of agree with him. Of course, it all depends on the rearing, but child-rearing is very hard in Europe, very hard . . . traditions, habits, culture . . . and those who went out are suffering from this.



The idea that ‘child-rearing is very hard in Europe’ is one that many interviewees repeated as they planned for their own future marriages and families.

Rottman and Kaya (2020: 11) observe that this imagined cultural intimacy with Turkish society has a basis in historical consciousness but ‘must also be seen as a constructed intimacy – a process of stereotyping and essentializing both Turkish and European cultures while asserting their belonging in the former’. While this is no doubt the case, our own interviews showed that Turkey’s perceived ‘Europeanness’ was equally important for young refugees’ senses of belonging, as it allowed them to aspire to European forms of temporal mobility – mobility as ‘going somewhere’ or ‘moving forward’ – without foregoing those aspects of cultural intimacy that allowed them to imagine a place outside Syria where they would be able to marry and raise their children.

Indeed, young Syrians whom we interviewed used the differences between their current Turkish and their former Syrian urban lives to create and imagine futures as ‘local’ cosmopolitans and global residents. Striving for these new potential futures not only gives young Syrians in Turkey today productive tools for feeling a sense of belonging to a country that continues to disenfranchise them, but also allows them to ‘become modern’ through access to an ‘imagined international order’ (Fehérváry 2002: 394) by way of technological, educational and sociopolitical awareness not experienced before in Syria. The next section explores some of the aspirations formed by these young Syrians through a new transnational imaginary.

### **‘Istanbul Changes You’: Becoming an Aspiring Cosmopolitan in a Global City**

The idea that ‘Syria was a closed society’ featured frequently in most of our interviews in Istanbul. When interviewees were asked to explain what this means, common responses included the fact that back in Syria everybody knew you wherever you went, that little interaction with the international arena was available and that access to technological advancement being developed ‘outside’ Syria was scarce. Najwa, a 30-year-old Syrian woman who moved to Istanbul in 2018 with her young family, and now lives in a Turkish neighbourhood in Üsküdar, explained most succinctly how Syria’s tight-knit social life functioned:

Over there [in Syria], the people care a lot about ‘image’. It was a nice feeling, you enter the restaurant and your head is raised, everyone knows you. Everyone knows who you are, who your dad is, who your mom is, who your sister is, what you do, where you work. If some negative gossip comes out about you, they talk about it. . . . We used to focus and care a lot about our reputations

and worry about something bad happening in front of others. Our parents raised us to be careful not to ruin our reputation in front of society. . . . If anyone wanted to do something [that wasn't socially acceptable], he would do it in secret so that no one could speak badly about him. [Parents] raise you to believe that you won't get married if you do something wrong [e.g. sex before marriage, being seen with men or women who are not family, etc.].

Living in a metropolis like Istanbul where 'everyone [who knows you] is so far away' makes it easier to avoid the gaze of those who would talk about you. This physical and social distance has allowed young Syrians to explore events, activities and new ideas that they perceived as not having been possible in the closed circles of their relatives and friends back in Syria. For this reason, Syrians like Najwa are pleased to be living in a majority Turkish neighbourhood where the 'gaze' of other Syrians can be avoided.

These new urban experiences, which we conceptualize as 'openings', have allowed young Syrians to experiment with ideas and lifestyles unfamiliar to them because of cultural norms, lack of resources and the need for patronage in order to access those resources back in Syria. Especially for those aspiring to be musicians, artists or anything deemed socially unacceptable, leaving Syria and integrating into Turkey's urban fabric has not only allowed them to imagine and fulfil personal aspirations, but also to feel appreciated in their new host society. The following excerpt from an interview with Nuha, a 24-year-old fine arts student at Istanbul University, reveals her initial struggles settling into urban Turkey after being forced to leave her home town on the outskirts of Damascus, as well as her sense of security and freedom to pursue the activities she loves, such as becoming a painter in the future:

**Dunya:** What were the personal changes that happened to you after you moved to this country?

**Nuha:** Firstly, the personal things that would happen to anyone who is learning about/getting exposed to a new culture. . . . I had to get over the fear, the fear of living [before] in a place where there are always air strikes, killing, explosions. [Here in Turkey] I got used to having electricity always, running water. . . . I got used to the idea that the most basic form of human rights is available here [for the most part]. This is the most important thing. . . . [pauses to think] . . . I got stronger.

**D:** You got stronger . . .

**N:** Yes, I was saying I got stronger. I entered a new kind of war where I needed to learn how to interact with people who lived normal lives. This was really difficult.

**D:** Really? Why?

**N:** Suddenly, I came out of '*adam* [i.e. loss, nothingness], in every sense of the word, and I was put in a place where everything is available. There is

no danger, people have everything, living a life that [at that time] I felt was impossible.

. . . When I feel and remember that I don't take these simple things for granted any more like these people, I feel good that I lived this [war] experience. Because it's true they are happy, but they don't know the real worth of the normalcy they are living. But I know it.

**D:** Wow, this is very powerful. Really.

**N:** These are the main things, apart from starting to enter a new *mujtama'* [society], starting to learn a new language, I also began to focus on, of course after I got through the first step of getting used to the new sense of security, I began to feel like I am finally in a place where I can accomplish the things I want to do.

**D:** Do you feel like you began to feel this way because you are now living in Istanbul?

**N:** Yes, in Turkey in general. Outside Syria, a place where they would not have appreciated me if I became an artist or a musician.

**D:** Can you tell me why this [becoming an artist or a musician] was difficult in Syria?

**N:** Not that it was difficult. . . . It's more a cultural thing and the way people think. It's frowned up[on] for a woman to become a musician or artist.

Nuha's sense of appreciation comes from her perception that the 'arts' as an industry and discipline is more established in urban Turkey, especially Istanbul. This perception is what led her to choose an 'undesirable' area of study against her parents' wishes when she applied for a fine arts degree in secrecy. 'I came home with my student ID one day and showed it to my mother. . . . She didn't say a word', Nuha explained. From that moment, Nuha's career choice was accepted, something she attributes to the indirect influence of Turkey's 'modern' sensibilities on her parents' world view. Now, Nuha lives in a flat in Fatih nearer to her job and university; she visits her family home in Esenler during her off days. She admits that her current lifestyle would not have been possible in Syria where a daughter only leaves the family home after she marries: 'It took some time for my parents to accept my decisions, but now they know that I am following a new and different path.' Therefore, for young Syrians like Nuha, settling in urban Turkey not only 'opened' their horizons through the development of new aspirations, but also changed their perspectives on what constitutes a 'normal' life. Now, a normal life means pursuing your interests even if they are socially undesirable, or in Nuha's terminology, even if your interests have the potential to ruin your social reputation.

A more direct example of how the social fabric of Istanbul helped transform aspirations for young and talented Syrians is the case of Hassan, a musician from Aleppo in his late twenties. The city gave him the opportunity to turn his hobby into a career, something he would not have been able to do if he stayed in Syria. Although Hassan owned a small studio with his family

back in Aleppo, he told us that living in Istanbul, which he refers to as the ‘city of stars’, helped him grow his name as a musician and producer because of the skilled Turkish musicians he encountered and the international scene he tapped into thanks to Istanbul’s diversity. Although he sees his arrival in Istanbul as a ‘beautiful coincidence’, something that occurred not intentionally but rather because of circumstances, he claims that his time in the city was key for his development as a musician and that ‘this is the place I need to continue living in’. When asked what made Istanbul such a place for him, he explained,

It’s the mixture between East and West, it’s very nice. You will find everything in Istanbul. You will find the European life, Western society and you will find Eastern society. You hear the *adan* from the mosque while also people drinking beers at the bars. And its music, for me the heart of Turkish music is in Istanbul. All the musicians here in Istanbul are ‘high-level’ so you can develop yourself as a musician. It’s a great place to be in terms of Eastern music.

Beyond the ‘high-level’ artists Hassan that was able to learn from and perform with through networking in various artistic circles around the city, he also pursued a university degree in film studies, where he learned important skills to help with his branding and music videos. He told us in follow-up conversations that if it wasn’t for Istanbul’s ‘development’ he never would have thought to pursue such a creative degree and would not have taken his talent as a musician to the next level by turning music into a career.

Access to technology provides another ‘opening’ for young Syrians in urban Turkey. This ‘technology’ was described to us as physical infrastructure such as public transportation, bridges and skyscrapers; *nizam* or temporal organization of the business day; and technical or soft infrastructure such as credit cards, online banking and computers. For many youth, all of this converged in the high-tech university campuses, which they compared to their equivalents in Syria. As Rawda remarks in the epigraph, this exposure to what many Syrians are calling ‘development and technological advancement’ helps them feel a sense of belonging in and appreciation for Turkey. For example, Bilal, an entrepreneur from Homs in his mid-twenties who now runs his own consulting firm in Istanbul, explains how his appreciation for his new life in Turkey makes him feel a stronger sense of belonging to the country than native Turks do:

**Dunya:** Do you now feel like Istanbul has become your new home?

**Bilal:** Yes, of course.

**D:** So, you feel a sense of belonging to the city?

**B:** Exactly. Probably, I feel a stronger sense of belonging than the native of this country. Because here, *ibn al-balad* [the native] is always complaining and doesn’t like his own country. And if you will excuse me, I know I wasn’t raised

here and I didn't live here [in my youth], but when I compare Turkey's past and the present we are in now [in terms of progress and development], the *dawle* [state] has a lot to do with the progress we see now, including the president himself. I won't hide from you, I know any individual or leader can have mistakes, but his mistakes aren't something that should make you forget all the good he has done for the country.

His comments focused on the development that Turkey has experienced during two decades under Justice and Development Party governance. Aware of intense criticism of the government, he later admitted that he would be at the frontlines of any revolutionary movement in Turkey in order to stop the destruction and decay experienced in Syria as a result of the conflict. 'In Syria, I was ignorant. I didn't know what was happening around the world, no one was speaking about anything. And if someone decided to speak, he would be gone with the wind. I don't want this to happen here. Not now, not ever', insisted Bilal. Through the development and technological progress available in Turkey, Bilal and other Syrians finally feel connected to an 'imagined international order' where they know what's happening around the world.

A final 'opening' that Istanbul gave young Syrians is their exposure to social diversity. Many interviewees discussed how Istanbul 'changed them' because the city allowed them to meet people from all over the world (other migrants, tourists, even other Syrians from different parts of Syria). For example, Abdullah decided to try 'couch-surfing' in Istanbul as a way of meeting new people from around the world because his status as a refugee does not allow him to travel outside Turkey. As a result, he and his Syrian flatmates gave up their living room for travellers wanting to visit and experience the city with locals. He told us that he never could have invited strangers into his home back in Syria, and that doing so in Istanbul has allowed him to meet over one hundred people from every part of the globe, including China, Brazil, the UK, Spain and Italy. Apart from meeting tourists, Abdullah also met migrants from other parts of Syria in Istanbul as his Syrian network grew over time: 'I never went to the army, so I didn't interact with anyone from Damascus, Der Ezour, Deraa or Homs. Here I met them and became friends with many people [from all over Syria]'.

Although these 'openings' or new urban experiences have given young Syrians new aspirations for success and belonging, it is important to note the impediments to the full integration of Syrians in Turkey. The most significant impediment is the difficulty of acquiring Turkish citizenship. According to interviewees in Bryant's three-year study, the process by which Syrians acquire a Turkish passport remains shrouded in mystery. Youth interviewed for the study related anecdotally that friends and family who had some sort of educational or professional capital – students in desirable

disciplines or young professionals such as doctors and teachers – often received invitations to apply. However, they also reported that others who seemed to have no such capital had also succeeded in receiving passports.

Another impediment is the hostility felt from Turkish neighbours and colleagues, especially as rising anti-migrant sentiments grow across the country. At the time of writing, the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has resulted in thousands of Afghanis attempting to cross the Iranian border in Turkey, and efforts by the Turkish government to block their entry. These events also triggered violent anti-migrant reactions by members of the Turkish public against Syrians and Syrian businesses. The sense of cultural intimacy that we discussed earlier is often not reciprocated by Turks (Rottman and Kaya 2020), making it an ambivalent belonging. Nevertheless, almost all Syrians we interviewed saw their futures in Turkey, precisely because the urban environment enabled them to imagine *having* a future (see Bryant and Knight 2019: 50–51). One way in which one can see this is in the anxious discussions of how to acquire Turkish citizenship and the types of mobility that it brings.

## Mobility, ‘Normal’ Lives and Urban Aspirations

‘Of course I would get the citizenship if they offered it’, remarked Subhi, a mechanical engineering graduate from Aleppo who currently works in the human resources office of an international company in Istanbul. The company had originally offered him a position in his own field that would have required him to move abroad, to Pakistan or Oman. When they found out that he only had a Syrian passport, they instead offered him a position in the Istanbul office. The experience left him with a lasting desire to have a ‘real’ passport, one that would allow him to travel ‘normally’, as anyone else with his aspirations would do. He wanted citizenship, he said, ‘For one reason only, or for two reasons. The first is the horizons that the citizenship would open for me. . . . The second is that I want to be done with the curse of having a Syrian passport. . . . I want to be a citizen who will receive it [a visa to travel] in a normal manner like all the others.’

As Bryant notes in a related article (forthcoming), refugee youth most often expressed the desire for citizenship as a desire for mobility. This was both physical mobility – as in moving freely to other parts of Turkey or travelling for work or education – and mobility as aspiration, part of what they imagined as a ‘normal’, middle-class life. Subhi dismissed his own country’s passport as abnormal and wanted one that would allow him to go to an embassy and receive a visa without having them ‘investigate me many times to see why I’m coming [to that country]’. As other anthropological work has shown, the hierarchical position of various passports in the global order

makes particular ones into ‘a symbol of free movement and travel’ (Jansen 2009: 822) and representative of ‘a high quality of life’ and ‘respected geopolitical position’ (Greenberg 2011: 88).

For our interviewees, then, Syrian documents were associated with immobility and abnormality, and Turkish documents were associated with mobility and ‘normal lives’. The possibility of travel and its association with middle-class jobs and aspirations were, in turn, part of the ‘openness’ that many Syrian youth found in Istanbul and other Turkish cities and that they compared to life in Syria.

Nuha, quoted above, continued:

If I was in Syria, there was a chance that I [wouldn’t] study in a different city but here, I went after my dream. . . . Here in Turkey there are principles and the possibility of developing yourself. However, in Syria, after you graduate, the maximum would be a master’s degree and then work with those who don’t have a master’s, and sometimes not in your field . . . But here, especially [since] most of the students are getting citizenships, they can work on themselves and improve their knowledge, even if not in their field, there are a lot of trainings. . . . Many things like this happen, you can improve yourself on all levels.

As noted above, youth in this study often described this ‘openness’ as an openness to the world. In this sense, the aspiration to physical mobility via Turkish citizenship and passports is also an intrinsic part of what Michael Jackson (2013) calls existential mobility. Mobility, he notes, is not only about survival, but must also be understood as ‘a metaphor for freedom’ (ibid.: 226). It is within this context that the ‘openness’ of a cosmopolitan metropolis may provide the model and wherewithal for moving forward even in a context of increasing rejection.

## **Conclusion: Urbanity, Aspiration and Belonging**

This chapter has described a certain group of Syrian youth today making their lives in Istanbul as ‘aspiring cosmopolitans’ for whom the affordances of the city – its infrastructure, technology and ‘openness’ – offer not only a vision of global interconnectedness (Peterson 2011), but also the possibility of realizing it. Much of the recent anthropological literature on cosmopolitanism has addressed the frustrations of such a global vision. As Schielke (2015: 154) summarizes, ‘The notion of cosmopolitanism, although properly speaking a privilege of intellectual and economical elites, is also useful for understanding what it means to have a horizon of expectation that is global but means of movement and advancement that are much more limited.’ As noted earlier, the sense that such cosmopolitan aspirations cannot be

fulfilled in one's own country or environment pushes many youths in the Middle East and North Africa towards 'the Outside', a term that Moroccans use (as *l'barra*) to denote what Alice Elliott (2021) describes as a topography or horizon of possibility. Our interlocutors in this study, as well as large numbers of the youth in Bryant's previous study, describe Turkey's cities as offering such a horizon of possibility, in contrast to their lives before displacement.

That contrast particularly emerges in descriptions of Istanbul as offering 'openings' and 'openness'. For such youth, a cosmopolitan metropolis like Istanbul brings you a few steps closer to 'freedom': freedom to pursue your interests against social expectations (Nuha), freedom from the gaze of others (Najwa), freedom to interact with strangers and invite them into your home (Abdullah) and freedom to know what's happening around the world and to engage with technological progress and development (Bilal).

In turn, imaginations of global futures in Istanbul create senses of belonging in Turkey. As one recent work notes, there has been little research conducted on 'the power of cities as forums for creating, maintaining, and contesting notions of national identity and belonging' (Diener and Hagen 2019: 14). While identity remains an open question for many of the youth in our study, they were able to speak clearly about senses of belonging and how to demarcate their homeland from the place where they imagined working and raising their children. Such belonging emerges, for instance, in Rawda's sense of relaxation when she returns to Istanbul or Bilal's willingness to fight should a civil war erupt in Turkey.

This suggests that cosmopolitanism as aspiration needs to be taken seriously not only in studies of economic migrants, but also in those of forced migration, particularly migrant youth. The youth population in the Middle East has been growing for more than four decades, and an ample anthropological literature shows how in an age of globalization their own states rarely provide the conditions for youth to fulfil such cosmopolitan aspirations. Whether or not Turkey will maintain the 'openness' that attracts such youth is itself an open question.

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## Notes

1. The basis of Syrian refugees' preferences during the 2015 period is also not clear, however. Despite an assumption that conditions in Turkey pushed Syrians to risk their lives to make it to Europe during that period, Kaya (2017b: 372) notes that only 20 per cent of the Syrians who arrived on the Greek islands in that period reported having previously spent more than six months in Turkey (see also UNHCR 2015).
2. This project was 'Integration and Well-Being of Syrian Youth in Turkey', Rebecca Bryant and Ahmet İçduygu, principal investigators, funded by Research Councils UK and TÜBİTAK (Türkiye Bilimsel ve Teknolojik Araştırma Kurumu, or the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey). During this project, the research team conducted a household survey in five cities (510 interviews) and in-depth interviews with 105 Syrian youth in those same cities.
3. Habash is currently completing research for a PhD project that explores the musical and cultural integration of Syrians in Turkey. For that research, she spent ten months in Istanbul interviewing and working with Syrian artists, musicians, students, entrepreneurs and teachers. She drew on her contacts using the snowball method to find participants for this study. The interviews that she conducted for her PhD project also informed this study's analysis.
4. By the International Office of Migration (IOM) estimates, 3,770 persons drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2015 (see IOM 2015).
5. Law on Foreigners and International Protection, Article 91.

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