# Reassessing Civil Society
# Refugee NGOS and the Role of Informal Networks in Turkey

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## Introduction

International and local NGOs are central actors within the context of refugee regimes, as many states rely on their services for the implementation of national migration and integration policies (Spencer and Delvino 2018, 4). This seems also to be true for Turkey, which is still the largest host of Syrian refugees worldwide. Many Turkish NGOs and initiatives were founded in recent years to exclusively work on refugee issues; and the "refugee crisis" became one of civil society's largest challenges (Tocci 2017, 5). Even though civil society, in the form of formalised and legally recognized associations, has received some scholarly attention within recent years (as e.g. Sunata and Tosun 2018, Danış and Nazlı 2019), little is known about how NGOs and other networks actually shape refugees' daily lives. Who are these NGOs and what kind of support are they offering refugees? Furthermore, looking at civil society as a theoretical concept, it can be understood in a much broader sense including not only formal associations but also in non-formalised ways like informal networks, social media groups, neighbourhood networks, churches or kinship groups (Demirovic 2003, 220; Layton 2004, 3). The role of these non-formalised civil society actors is even less researched. How are refugees, as active members of civil society, interacting with these civil society groups? And how is civil society linked to refugee agency and last but not least, how is it embedded within the larger context of the refugee regime? With this paper I aim to tackle these questions by referring to my ethnographic material from a case

study on civil society actors in the context of "non-camp" Syrian refugees[1] in Izmir, Turkey's third largest city and in comparison with two other recent case studies from Ulaş Sunata and Salih Tosun (2018) and Didem Danış and Dilara Nazlı (2019). Therefore, I will first look at the general situation of refugees in Turkey and its refugee regime. Secondly, I will give a brief overview over civil society and its theoretical background; and present my understanding of civil society inspired by Robert Layton's approach (Layton 2004). Thirdly, the case study on Izmir will shed light on how formalised and non-formalised civil society is operating within the context of refugees. Finally, I will discuss these findings in regard to the popular concepts of refugee agency and the refugee regime. The analysis will show, that reassessing civil society within that context helps to understand how refugee agency is transforming and shaping collective actions, which help refugees, especially "non-camp refugees" who are lacking basic support from the state, to cope and organise their new life situations and life projects. At the same time the suggested focus on civil society enables the creation of a linkage between the refugee regime and refugee agency through its focus on activities and dynamics lying between the sphere of the state and the individual.

## Turkey and it's refugee regime

Since 2014, Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees, including about 3.7 million Syrians and 400,000 non-Syrian forced migrants in 2020 (UNHCR Global Focus Turkey 2020). The vast majority of forced migrants live in urban or rural areas within the local communities and nearly half of all Syrian refugees are children (meaning under the age of 18). Less than 2% of Syrian refugees live in Temporary Accomodation Centers (3RP[2] Turkey 2019-2020, 5). Thus, the large majority of Syrian refugees are "non-camp refugees", who tend to be more vulnerable (Lubkemann 2019, 206). Turkey was urged to develop a new legal framework for foreigners and asylum seekers, which the

1 "Non-camp" refugees is used to describe the situation of those refugees living among local communities in contrast to refugees staying in camps, as outlined for example by Ayselin Yıldız and Elif Uzgören (2016).

2 3RP is the abbreviation for the platform Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, which is explained in the next paragraph.

government was already working on before 2011 (İçduygu 2015, 5). The Turkish government implemented the Geneva Convention in 1961, though with the geographical limitation to European citizens (an option which was offered to signatory states). Until now only refugees, who are fleeing from specific events in Europe, can gain the status as a "refugee" within the country, as Turkey never changed this geographical limitation. All other people, who are seeking asylum, are treated as "guests" with temporary protection (ibid). As a response to the specific situation of Syrian refugees, the Turkish government developed a new Temporary Protection (TP) regulation in 2014.

In 2019 around 2,7 million Syrians were registered under the Temporary Protection Regulation, which legally guarantees access to services in national systems, such as health, education and social services (3RP Turkey 2019-2020, 5). At the end of 2019 more than 680,000 Syrian children were enrolled in formal education and 33,000 students had access to tertiary education. Since 2016 the Temporary Protection Regulation also opened up the possibility of gaining access to the labour market through official working permits. Until the end of 2019 more than 130,000 working permits were issued to Syrian refugees. In addition to the working permits, refugees are also able to work officially in seasonal agriculture or animal husbandry, as those areas are exceptions. However, the large majority of refugees is still working within the informal sector without any security. Together with increasing unemployment this remains one of the key challenges. As regular incomes are missing, basic needs are uncovered, as for example adequate housing and food. Around 42% of registered refugees live under the poverty line. The state is hardly providing services for those refugees. These current numbers, developments and challenges are reported by the UNHCR and the platform Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, abbr. 3RP (UNHCR Global Focus Turkey 2020; 3RP Turkey 2019-2020 n.d., 6ff). Interestingly, refugees face the same challenges in 2020 as in 2015, when I collected the ethnographic material for the case study in Izmir. During that time, finding jobs, a regular income, adequate houses and access to health care were the most urgent needs of refugees.

The UNHCR as well as the platform 3RP are core players within Turkey's refugee regime. The 3RP platform is co-lead by UNHCR and UNDP together with international, national and local partners to strategically address and coordinate activities to support Syrian refugees themselves and also the governments of the top five host countries Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Jordan (3RP n.d.). In Turkey, the 3RP works together with the governmental organ-

isation Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM). The DGMM is

> ...the main entity in charge of the implementation of policies and processes for all foreigners in Turkey. It is the sole responsible authority in Turkey for procedures regarding temporary protection beneficiaries and international protection applicants (including registration, documentation and refugee status determination), stateless persons and other foreigners. (3RP Turkey 2019-2020 n.d., 13).

As mentioned by the 3RP, the DGMM has also a coordinating role, which should connect local authorities, international organisations, EU institutions, civil society and other stake holders. The UNHCR furthermore states that "Civil society[3] actors will remain key to the response and defining their role as complementary to the government service provision a priority for the coming years." (UNHCR Global Focus Turkey 2020). Thus, similar to many other European countries, Turkey's refugee regime is strongly relying on civil society services, which act complementary to state services. But what or who is civil society in that context and what are NGOs working on refugees doing on the ground to support refugees within their current situations?

## Reassessing civil society conceptions

The concept of civil society in its modern meaning originated in the late 18th century when the development of private and economic interests initiated the differentiation between civil society and the state. Georg W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx and Alexis de Tocqueville are well known for their conceptions of civil society, which influenced current approaches (Abdelrahman 2004, 18). In the social sciences, civil society became relevant during the 1980s in relation to East European and Latin American state transformations (Hemment 2004, 219f). At that time the social movements, which lead to those democratic revolutions, were recognised and described as part of civil society. This led to the current dominating liberal political approaches, which define civil society

3 UNHCR does not offer a definition of civil society per se. However, on their partnership platform, the UN partner portal, they refer to civil society organisations, as either NGOs, community-based organisations or academic institutions (UN partner portal n.d.).

as voluntary and self-organising associations that contribute to democratisation and boost liberal values (see e.g. Keane 2013, Edwards 2011). Thus, within public discourse but also within academia civil society is mostly understood as NGOs or other recognized associations or initiatives. This is also the case for forced migration studies and relevant stake holders within the refugee regime.

Anthropologists and other scholars have elaborated different perspectives on the concept of civil society and challenged the "NGOization" and ethnocentric biased dimension of civil society (Hann and Dunn 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Informal associations based on kinship, village, religious or ethnical affiliations are, in a narrow sense, coercively organized and would be excluded from this perspective. However, anthropologists have argued that these groups play an important role within social organization, strengthening community cohesion, and act as a sphere lying between the individual/core family and the modern state (Hann 1996, 5).

Another approach to civil society was developed by scholars, who picked up Gramsci's perspective, within which civil society is understood as an integral part of the state and not something outside or in opposition to it (Demirovic 2003; Abdelrahman 2004; Al-Rebholz 2014). Beside the political society, which describes the government and its institutions, civil society is the state's most resilient constitutive element. It is a non-violent sphere built on consent. This includes all socio-cultural institutions, in which values and meanings are established, such as private organizations, the publishing industry, schools, associations, clubs and churches (Kumar 1993, 383). This approach is used to observe and analyse power struggles within the state and its different social groups or classes.

However, "…whether in liberal or neo-Marxist guise the Western concept of civil society continues to exert a powerful fascination in political anthropology" (Hann 2018, 3). Therefore, I am sticking closely to the definition of civil society given by anthropologist Layton, who tries to avoid those ethnocentric, Western dimensions and which allows me to reflect in a more inclusive and encompassing way on the role of associations and collective actions within the context of refugees. Layton understands civil society in a broader non-normative sense as social organisations which occupy the space between the household and the state (Layton 2004, 3). These social organisations enable people to coordinate and manage resources and activities. Although he emphasizes the economic component, Layton also includes non-economic activities. According to him socio-cultural organisations like ethnic or kinship

groups, churches, mosques, clubs and, as I would add, informal networks belong to civil society (ibid). Thus, not only do voluntary groups belong to civil society but also networks which are "coersive", such as kinship groups. Furthermore, civil society is detached from a normative dimension, which is relevant within dominating liberal political approaches for which NGOs as civil society actors par excellence contribute to democracy, social cohesion and the "good society" (Fewer 2013). Additionally, this understanding of civil society does not differentiate between members of a society. It does not matter if a person is a Turkish citizen, a refugee or an asylum seeker; as everyone is equally part of civil society while being involved within collective activities.

## Civil society and NGOs in Turkey

The term civil society, called *civil toplum* in Turkish, gained importance in Turkey during the 1980s, similar to other parts of the world. As political activities from parties and trade unions were forbidden at that time, civil society groups were the only possibility for expressing discontent (Ergun 2010, 509). Since the 1990s, NGOs are booming, especially in the three largest cities: Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, where one-third of all NGOs operate. When Turkey was approaching the EU, civil society in Turkey received another boost (Dereci 2015, 19). The EU as well as other international organisations represent a liberal understanding of civil society, which sees civil society and especially NGOs as a condition for democratic institutionalization. Thus, civil society actors were strengthened and new NGOs emerged. These new NGOs, which were mostly funded by the EU, spread Western European-oriented social, cultural and political ideas around Turkey (Ergun 2010, 507). In addition the funding of international organisations and local refugee NGOs became an essential part of the EU-Turkey Statement in 2016 (Anatolitis 2020), with the aim to hinder further refugee influx.

Still, similar to Turkey's political landscape, Turkish civil society is strongly divided along different ethnic, religious and ideological lines (Şimşek 2004, 63). Associations can be recognized as Turkish, Kurdish, Alevi, Sunni, Islamist, Kemalist, politically right or left. There are also cross-cuttings between these groups. In addition, it should be mentioned that Islamic associations played and continue to play a relevant and strategic role for the AKP and its retention of power (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). Charity organisations became substitutes for the state's welfare services. I will pick up this issue later on in the context of service provision for refugees.

While in 2004 61,000 NGOs were registered (Şimşek 2004, 48) the number has grown to 130,000 in 2017 (Tocci 2017, 10). This boost of formally recognised associations strengthened the "NGOization" of civil society, which describes the narrow understanding of civil society as NGOs. Therefore, I will first of all take a closer look at NGOs as formalized civil society actors, dealing with refugees (refugee NGOs as I call them) building up on my case study of refugee NGOs in Izmir. In a second step I will focus on non-formalized civil society actors, which came up as relevant actors within the refugee context in Izmir.

## *Refugee NGOs in Izmir*

A large number of those NGOs, which were established during the last decade, were founded in response to the high influx of refugees. This is also the case in Izmir, Turkey's bottleneck to Europe. Located next to several Greek islands on Turkey's West coast, hundreds of thousands of refugees entered Izmir in search of smugglers, who would organise their refuge across the Mediterranean Sea. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among refugee NGOs and "non-camp" Syrian refugees during autumn 2015. That was the year with the highest number of refugees arriving in Turkey (UNHCR Dataviz n.d.). According to UNHCR, over 350,000 refugees have arrived at Greek islands next to Izmir's coast during September and October 2015 (UNHCR n.d.). Thus, over three hundred thousand people must have transited the city within these two months alone. Refugee NGOs estimated the number of refugees staying in Izmir at that time from 67,000 to 100,000. At the beginning of 2019 over 200,000 Syrian refugees were officially registered in Izmir. Still the number might be higher as not all refugees are registered yet. Refugees, who are settling in Izmir, are staying in specific areas near Basmane like in Kadifekale or in areas at the outskirts of the city as, for example, Torbalı or Foça.

Izmir counts over four million inhabitants, and Syrian refugees mingled into the city's population without attracting too much attention. Refugees came to Izmir long before the Syrian crisis started in 2011. The Association A[4] founded in 2008, was the first NGO working on refugee issues in Izmir. People from Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq were searching for smugglers who would help them to find ways to get to Greece. Besides Association A, I interviewed representatives of five other associations during my fieldwork

4 The names of the interviewed associations are anonymised throughout the paper for safety reasons.

(B, C, D, E and F). Besides those interviews, I carried out an in-depth analysis at the association E and conducted problem centred interviews with eleven households of refugees covering 56 persons of different age, gender, ethnicities and social classes. The six associations were all legally recognized by state authorities at the time of the fieldwork. While three of these six organisations exclusively worked on refugee issues (A, B, F), the other three had a broader range of topics and address other groups as well (E, C, D).

**Association A** is a professional NGO based on a legal and human rights-based approach. Association A's work is project-driven and their financial situation is dependent on project funding from the EU and other institutions. The employees are women, though the rest of the voluntary team is gender-mixed. They offer legal support to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Additionally, Association A monitors the situation of refugees in Izmir as well as in other places, and supports refugees who have been locked up in detention centres. Based on interviews and encounters with their clients, they also try to inform the public about illegal treatments of refugees, as for example through push-backs, forced "voluntary returns" or for example, the handling of those refugees, who gathered at the Turkish-Greek border in spring 2021.

**Association B** is a nationwide organisation in Turkey, which was founded in 1995 during the Iraqi war. It is the oldest national organisation working on refugees and partner organisation of the UNHCR and is responsible for registering asylum seekers for the UN. The local branch in Izmir was opened in December 2014, as the situation of refugees in Izmir became an urgent issue. The employees are mostly social workers, translators and further employees who have experience with marginalised groups. Association B offers psychological assistance, health care, educational activities like language courses, but also music or painting courses for children within these centres. Refugees can address Association B with any kind of problem and the organisation tries to follow up on each refugee's case. They especially focus on vulnerable people, like families with missing male members, disabled people, orphans and unattended minors. They also deal with legal questions such as, for example, deportation decisions or push-back cases as well as relocation programs in relation to UNHCR programs.

**Association C** is an Islamic organisation, which belongs to the Hatuniye mosque in Basmane and is located directly inside the mosque's building.

It is typical for bigger mosques to maintain their own charity associations. Employees are mostly men. Referring to its ideological background, the association can be positioned near the AKP. As the Hatuniye mosque is located directly in the centre of Basmane, refugees have always been among their regular beneficiaries. Before the Syrian war started, mainly Afghans, Somalis and refugees from other African countries came there to get something to eat. Since the Syrian crisis, refugees have occupied the place in front of the mosque, where they laid out their mattresses and build up provisional homes using cords, sheets and cartons. The organisation regularly distributes food and material packages.

**Association D** Is the second association with an Islamic background, and it is a national charity organisation with branches all over Turkey. It has similar goals as Association C. They do typical charity work and are funded by donations of private actors. Their only activity related to refugees happens in cooperation with Association C. They sponsor the food for meal distributions at the Hatuniye mosque.

**Association E** was founded in November 2014 and is affiliated with the "Peoples' Democratic Congress" (HDK), which is a union of left-wing organisations and parties in Turkey. The organisation is based on volunteers and funded through private donations. Many of the volunteers are doctors or medical staff. Therefore, they provide free medical check-ups for refugees in the area of Basmane, but also in Foça and Torbali. Additionally, they collect information on refugees' needs and call out for donations in order to prepare food and hygienic packages, especially focussing on women and children. Detailed reports are published and events organised in order to inform both the public and also state institutions on refugees' conditions and to improve their situation on a long-term basis. As the organisation is known to be affiliated with HDK, the police watch them closely. Especially after the *coup* attempt in 2016[5] and the ongoing repression against NGOs, activists, journalists and academics, the organisation had to adapt their work, for example by focussing solely on organising cultural events.

5 In June 2016 parts of the military started a *coup d'etat* which failed and led to mass arrests within the military and police forces, but also of prosecutors, judges, civil servants and journalists.

**Association F** is an organisation founded for Syrians by Syrians. A small group of friends, Syrians who came to Izmir before the war began, started to help out Syrian refugees with translations at hospitals. They were teachers, businessmen and medical students. Out of this small group the idea of an official organisation arose and was finally established in September 2013. Their main aim is to support Syrian refugees in all different kinds of ways: mostly they are translating for them, passing information, gathering donations, giving out food and non-food packages for families and helping refugees to find homes or jobs. The association is based on volunteers. Their main work happens via phone, over Facebook or direct contact. As Association F had strong contacts with Syrian refugees, who are spread around Izmir, they became attractive partners for international organisations (IOs). Over the years they started several cooperations with IOs, like *Women and Health Alliance* (WAHA) and *Mercy Corps*. However, *Mercy Corps* similar to hundreds of other NGOs, was closed in 2017 by the Turkish government. Only a few days later Association F's own Facebook page was hacked by a Turkish right-wing group and since then the association has stopped its social media presence, though they continued with their work.

Not only Association F became an important broker for international organisations. My observations showed that also E, B and A were functioning as key intermediaries for international organisations as well as for journalists, researchers and other international institutions. They were depending on local NGOs in order to obtain access to the field, get in contact with refugees and receive information on the current situation.

Thus, one half of the interviewed organisations, especially the professional NGOs, had employees who carried out their work; the other half was based on volunteer work. Most people who got involved with organisations belonged to the higher-educated, middle class. Employees and volunteers were gender-mixed in most NGOs. All NGOs, except Association F, had to work with translators, in order to be able to communicate with refugees in Kurdish or Arabic. The beneficiaries of NGOs often didn't know from whom they received help. Instead, the translators became the persons whom they could trust. The translators were remembered and recognized by refugees, and therefore held key positions within the associations as they were the ones, who were in touch with them. All of them had some sort of office, and three of them received refugees in their offices. The other three were out-reaching and thus connected with refugees at the places where they stayed or where they were otherwise needed. Two of those with employees were project-based, thus they were

financed by institutions like the EU or UN. These two organizations were also the only ones, which were following a rights-based approach trying to maintain a politically neutral position. Consequently, they could be recognized as classical Western NGOs. The other organisations were dependent on private donations. Two associations were based on Islamic ideology and one could be positioned as left and pro-Kurdish. The last one of the six associations was led by Syrian immigrants and had no clear ideological connotation.

The case study revealed a strong division between Islamic and non-Islamic organisations. Those organisations which could be defined as rights-based and left-wing oriented cooperated with each other on specific occasions or at least knew about each other's work. Also, the Islamic associations cooperated with each other at certain points. And even though these two larger ideological groups often carried out similar activities to address refugees and shared similar goals or claimed the same demands, cooperation over cross-cuttings were inconceivable.

Concerning the activities of refugee NGOs, it can be said that three of the associations (E, A and F) tried to inform the public about refugees' conditions in Izmir in order to achieve positive changes on a broader and structural level. However, most of the activities directed to refugees themselves were some sort of material help, in the form of food and non-food packages for families, and serving hot meals (E, C, D, B, F), or the provision of health services (E, B). These activities can be subsumed under the term of humanitarian aid, as they are necessary for covering the basic needs of refugees. Only a few organisations offered activities directed at empowering refugees in rebuilding their new lives in the city such as language courses (B, E) or helping to find jobs (F).

However, that NGOs had to fill in to cover those basic needs, reveals the lack of support and resources provided by the state. But considering the huge number of more than 100,000 refugees living in Izmir, it is obvious that refugee NGOs were only able to address a small amount of them. Still refugees managed to organise their own lives. The findings, presented below, will show the crucial role that non-formalized civil society, in the form of neighborhood or kinship networks as well as social media groups, plays in regard to coping and managing refugees' life situations in Izmir.

### *Refugees and non-formalized civil society in Izmir*

As I have outlined, civil society can be understood as being much more than just formally organised or institutionalized associations. Civil society summarizes all collective economic and non-economic activities of a community. Kinship or neighbourhood networks, churches, mosques or informal networks are part of civil society. Similar to many other researchers I started my fieldwork in Izmir with formal organisations and NGOs. Through observations in the field and especially in relation to how NGOs work within the refugee context, the relevance of other informal networks became obvious. Last but not least, the interviews with refugees revealed how different forms of civil society play essential roles within refugees' daily lives and struggles.

My ethnographic findings showed that refugee NGOs actually depend on informal networks as they are operating as prerequisites which enable them to reach refugees in the first place and implement their activities successfully. Local NGOs that are office-based somehow need to reach out to refugees who are spread around the city with four million inhabitants. For example, an employee of Association B explained, that when they first started to build up their local branch in Izmir, they had to go out on the streets in districts, where refugees were supposed to live in order to find them. They conducted interviews with over hundred households in order to learn about refugees' needs and to inform them about their activities. This procedure took a lot of resources from the organisation. After some time, they learnt that the information is passed mouth-to-mouth by refugees through kinship and neighbourhood networks. Now the employees knew that they just had to call a few families and the information concerning their activities would be spread through those networks. Similar to Association B, Association A and Association C were also relying on such informal networks, which led refugees to their offices. Without them, local NGOs would constantly need to put resources into finding and getting in touch with the refugees directly. Similarly, those NGOs who were not operating within offices, but reaching out to their target group also focused on specific areas, where refugees were known to stay. These areas in Izmir mostly included Basmane and Kadifekale. Consequently, refugees who were staying in other areas or who might not be well connected to informal networks were less likely to be informed about NGOs' work or to receive direct help.

Hence, while local NGOs are brokers between refugees and the media and the international community; informal civil society actors are intermedi-

aries between refugees and local NGOs. However, this also means that many refugees might never hear about those offers and support from NGOs. Taking the large number of refugees into account, it is also clear that the majority of them never got in contact with any organisation, nor could they be handled by the local NGOs.

Thus, informal networks among refugees function as information providers and help in connecting them with NGOs. Finding and receiving information on how things work within the country of residence are crucial for refugees to organise their current life situation, especially when they do not understand the language. Besides these mouth-to-mouth networks, social media groups are highly relevant for information as well. A few Syrian migrants, who have been living in Turkey for some time and saw the need to help other Syrian refugees newly arriving in the city, founded the Facebook group "Syrians in Izmir" in 2015. This group of friends was also part of the same group that initiated the foundation of the formal association, Association F, as described above.

Today the Facebook group counts over 3,800 members. Information shared within the group ranges from postings on banks, which offer bank accounts to Syrians, hospitals and medical support, useful phone numbers, NGOs' offers, and job offers. It is also used for selling or buying things like vehicles or electronic devices; and it is a platform to ask questions and for exchange with others. The language used within the group is mainly Arabic. One of the founders of the group explained that the Facebook group is very important, as it enables them to spread reliable information as many rumours are passed among refugees. The importance of social media for refugees was also examined, for example, by Alencar (2017) and, connected to this, smartphones are essential devices, as outlined by Kaufmann (2020).

Drawing on examples from the interviews conducted with refugee households throughout the fieldwork I will now illustrate further how refugees were organising their resources and getting support within informal networks from their neighbourhoods or through Syrian solidarity groups. Thus, the next paragraph will show that non-formalised civil society is strongly driven by refugee agency and additionally reveal solidarity actions of the local community. A small part of the families I interviewed had relatives or neighbours living in Turkey before they had arrived there. They were the first anchor points in their new country of residence. For example, when Hasan[6],

6 The names of the interlocutors have been changed for privacy reasons.

arrived in Turkey, he directly went to stay with his relatives in Mersin. They helped him to find a job and he worked in the fields for some time. After a few months, Hasan moved to Istanbul, where he tried to leave for Europe. Since he couldn't gain enough money, he became stranded in Izmir, similar to a large number of other refugees. He started to work at a phone shop and to help refugees with transportation and translations, which means that he actually got involved with the smuggling of migrants from Turkey to Greece. Hasan sent the money he earned to his family in Syria, who were then able to leave for Turkey themselves.

In another interview, Ahmed told me that his relatives were already living in Izmir and they helped him and his family to find a house in Kadifekale, a district in Izmir with a high percentage of Kurdish population. Similar to Hasan's and Ahmed's cases, another family knew that their neighbours in Syria were fleeing to Turkey and they stayed in contact with them. They followed them directly to the same place, where the men of the family were able to acquire jobs within agriculture. Thus, these (transnational) kinship and neighbourhood networks helped refugees during their flight and led them to specific places in Turkey, where they knew they would meet people they already know and who, furthermore, would be able to help them to start organising their new lives within their new country of residence. Relatives or neighbours from Syria supported them to find houses and jobs; two essential elements and basic needs for starting a new life.

Not only former neighbourhood networks are relevant, but also newly established informal networks within the districts in which refugees are staying. One of the main districts, where refugees were finding houses in Izmir, is Kadifekale. Flats were cheap but very simple and often sub-standard. They merely consisted of one or two rooms for each family. For example, one family with three children, lived in the back of one house on the ground floor. The flat consisted of one room of about ten square metres and a little kitchenette. For the interview, we were sitting in the main room, which was laid out with carpets. On one side was a small, low table with a little TV on it. Some pillows were positioned next to the walls. There were no windows in the room; the walls weren't rendered and the actual doors were missing in all door frames. Consequently, the front entrance remained open the entire time. The whole family, consisting of five persons, was living and also sleeping in the single living room. As described earlier, most families are composed of at least five family members and often extended family members belong to the household

as well. In one case eleven people and one new-born child were living together in one small flat.

All of those families, who were living in flats at the time of my fieldwork, experienced support from their neighbours in the district. Most of them received material support like carpets, a small TV or kitchen materials for their flats. These neighbours were Turkish and Kurdish people, but especially also other refugees. Esat, father of a family, explained that he didn't receive money from his employer last month, so he wasn't able to pay the rent for the house. Another Syrian refugee, who was not a direct neighbour, but who lived near his house, gave him money for the rent. The man was very grateful for that, although he continued to have the same problem in the following month. In addition to the material help, information concerning associations and NGOs was also passed on through those informal neighbourhood networks, as mentioned before. These examples from Hasan, Ahmed and Esat show how Syrian families were managing their own livelyhoods using old and new neigbouhood networks and ties, while the Turkish state and its institutions weren't present and didn't play an active role within organising their new lives. Also NGOs who received the role of complementing the state's lack of support, weren't reaching them. Instead Ahmed, Hasan and Esat were acting on their own using connections and building up other forms of support mechanisms. Thus they were relying on their own agency, which enabled them to take a foothold within their new country of residence.

## Civil society – between the refugee regime and agency

Civil society refers to the space between the state (governmental institutions), and the household (the family and the individual). This means that focussing on civil society within forced migration studies offers an additional possibility to analyse activities and happenings between the dynamics of the refugee regime and refugee agency. In relation to Layton's definition of civil society, all kinds of collective actions, which aim to manage and coordinate resources and activities, can be understood as civil society. Throughout my case study I highlighted formalized civil society organisations, like NGOs, on the one side and non-formalized civil society organisations, like neighbourhood, kinship or social media groups on the other.

Besides international organisations, national and local NGOs need to be recognised as central social actors within refugee regimes, as governments

strongly rely on these NGOs to provide services to refugees and fill the gaps in order to cover basic needs. Additionally, local NGOs are relevant stake holders as they function as intermediaries linking refugees with international organisations, the media and also researchers. As a reaction to the high influx of Syrian refugees, Turkey's refugee NGOs landscape increased immensely and the Turkish government strategically shifted responsibilities to civil society organisations (Danış and Nazlı 2019, 153). The majority of those refugee NGOs are service-oriented and provide humanitarian aid. Since Barbara Harrell-Bond's ground-breaking work on refugee camps and her criticism on humanitarian aid, several anthropological studies have exemplified the ambiguity of humanitarianism (Harrell-Bond 1986; Verdirame, Harrel-Bond and Lomo 2005). Thus, NGOs' activities need to be closely analysed in order to see in which ways they are interacting with refugees. Some NGOs might contribute to refugees' empowerment, others might create and/or recreate dependencies. The case study from Izmir has shown that only a few NGOs help refugees to gain more self-empowerment for example through language courses. Furthermore, there was only one addressing refugees' needs to find jobs and houses, which are elementary for building up a new life in the country of residence. This was done by the association, which was led by Syrian migrants. Sunata and Tosun's case study shows similar outcomes by highlighting that organisations led by Syrians seem to be more successful in empowering refugees (2018, 13). They also add that community centres, which provide spaces for refugees to socialize and organise themselves are similarly relevant for refugee integration (ibid).

However, the reason why so many refugee NGOs remain limited to humanitarian aid is connected to Turkey's refugee regime and its political climate. There is an ongoing tension or competition between the regime's duty to provide those in need with the right to asylum, show compassion and hospitality on the one side; and the securitization of refugees, creation of fear and repression through national policies on the other (Fassin 2019, 5050). As Turkey traditionally has a "strong" state, authorities are highly suspicious concerning civic participation in general (Çarkoğlu and Cenker 2011, 755). These strong state institutions impede the creation of horizontal ties between different civil society groups and try to keep civil society apolitical. In 2017 only 23,000 of the 130,000 associations were dedicated to research or advocacy on political and social issues like gender rights, education, climate or refugees. Thus, politically charged issues are avoided (Tocci 2017, 10). In particular, the coup d'état attempt in 2016, and subsequent state of emergency, increased the

repressive atmosphere and led to the reduction of civic space. Over a thousand associations were closed and NGO staff members imprisoned. Also, international NGOs, such as the already mentioned Mercy Corps, an humanitarian organisation working on Syrian refugees, were affected by the crackdown (Tocci 2017, 10ff). Thus, refugee NGOs are similarly affected by those state restrictions. As mentioned above, Association E had to limit their activities addressing refugees in Izmir to cultural events, as they were under strict observation by the police.

Danış and Nazlı's case study on refugee NGOs has shown that specific organisations, which share the same ideological religious grounds and are loyal to the state, are in a "faithful" alliance with the government (Danış and Nazlı 2019). They conclude that Turkey is using

> ... a new approach in refugee policy where the AKP government promotes certain non-governmental actors such as municipalities and civil society organizations (...) to fulfil the requirements of the state's responsibilities. This new approach is a selective governance model where the state delegates some of its functions of refugee reception to NGOs that it considers to be ideologically and politically akin (Danış and Nazlı 2019, 153).

This new form of refugee governance strategically prioritizes social assistance and ignores or even hinders advocacy of refugee rights initiatives (ibid, 153). Moreover, Sunata and Tosun's fieldwork highlight that NGOs showing religious references and proximity to AKP's ideology gain positive effects for their projects and activities (2018, 17). However, this means that if an organisation is not in line with the government's views, as the example of Association E shows, the organisation is in danger of being threatened, under surveillance or even closed. In order to survive, organisations have developed strategies to remain outside of mainstream and official channels and keep a low profile (Sunata and Tosun 2018, 17).

Thus, formal civil society, in the form of legally recognized NGOs, is strongly connected to and overseen by the Turkish government and the refugee regime. The existing tension described above has direct effects on NGOs' daily work. In contrast to that, non-formalized civil society remains mostly outside of the governments' reach or control. Kinship, neighbourhood networks as well as social media groups, or Syrian solidarity groups are untouched by policies, restrictions and the political circumstances. Although the Turkish government tries to take control over the internet and social media from time to time by blocking platforms like Facebook and YouTube.

This also happened during my fieldwork when bomb attacks directed at a peace rally in Ankara caused over a hundred people's deaths. But people already know a lot of ways to overcome these barriers and the restrictions never hold on for long.

Non-formalized civil society is strongly connected to refugee agency. Agency is "closely linked to performance as it underlines the individual's capacity to engage actively with their social and cultural context" (Bauer-Amin 2017, 139). The term agency is also connected to the individual's capability to receive and manage material and non-material resources as well as to engage within organising practices as the stories from Hasan or Ahmed have examplified (Essed, Schrijvers, and Frerks 2005, 2). Refugee agency is therefore used to highlight refugees' own decisions and choices, and their strategies to counter-balance victimisation as imposed by humanitarianism. As the analysis of refugee NGOs in Izmir has shown, most of them carried out humanitarian aid addressing basic needs, while only few of them offered sustainable support through language courses or a platform to find jobs. This lack of empowerment and ongoing focus on humanitarianism might explain, why the conditions and needs of refugees have not changed within the last five years.

Non-formalised civil society is characterized by the collective actions of refugees themselves as well as the local community. The analysis of activities of these civil society networks shows that their objectives are to some extent similar to those of humanitarian aid. Informal neighbourhood networks help to cover basic needs and get material support. But the difference is that these networks are based on refugee's agency, as refugees organise themselves within those networks in order to manage their resources. As my fieldwork has shown, these informal networks are highly relevant in regard to activities around passing information on how things are working, where to get further help, and especially the possibilities to finding jobs and houses. These issues are necessary to organise a new life within the current county of residence. The informal networks are at the same time relevant intermediaries between refugees and formalized civil society, as NGOs rely on those networks to get in touch with their beneficiaries. The state and its institutions, on the other side, are hardly present within this daily struggle. Though as a consequence, the refugee regime itself is dependent on those informal networks as it is strongly relying on civil society organisations to provide services to refugees.

Donny Meertens' case study from Columbia has shown similar outcomes concerning internally displaced migrants fleeing to urban settings (Meertens

2004). Refugees who engage in informal networks get rooted sooner within the city and are able to rebuild new "life projects" as Meertens calls it (2004, 76). Women, in contrast to men, are stronger at engaging within informal networks, and therefore they are able to cope with their new situations more quickly than men, who rely more often on political networks and institutions of the refugee regime. Although Meertens does not refer to these networks as civil society throughout her paper, all of these collective activities and networks she highlights can be summarized under civil society. Furthermore, her study shows that these informal networks, hence civil society, are spaces where new directions, gender relations and forms of social inclusion, which are not built on former relationships, are created.

## Conclusion

The case study from Izmir shows that refugee NGOs' work mainly focuses on humanitarian aid, in the form of material help or health services in order to cover basic needs. This exposes the lack of systematically organised and sustainable support for refugees from state authorities, who are shifting the responsibility of care and refugee support to civil society organisations. As other case studies have shown (Danış and Nazlı 2019; Sunata and Tosun 2019), one of the reasons why NGOs are limited to humanitarian aid, is linked to the political climate and the refugee regime. The case studies reveal the constant tension of the national refugee regime, created by the urgency to support refugees within the country of residence and the desire to control them. Turkish refugee NGOs, who are not in line with the government's perspectives, face repression, are under surveillance and in danger of being shut down; while (especially religious) organisations, which are ideologically near to the leading party, are supported. Keeping the field of activities of NGOs limited to humanitarian aid is furthermore a fruitful strategy by the state to hinder refugee agency and empowerment.

However, the focus on non-formalised civil society shows how refugees are managing their new life situations by relying on their own agency without interference or support from the refugee regime or NGOs. This is helpful for shedding light on the coping mechanisms of "non-camp" refugees, classified as especially vulnerable and still less studied by academics (Lubkemann 2019, 206). Syrian refugees in Izmir organise and manage their resources within informal neighbourhood, kinship or social media groups. Those are the spaces,

where they find material help, job offers and useful information on how to organise their life situations. These informal networks also function as prerequisites for refugee NGOs. Syrian refugees learn about the NGOs' offers through their neighbours or social media groups of Syrians. This means that non-formalised civil society is largely driven by refugee agency, which in turn shows how refugee agency is converted into collective activities and social structures. Additionally, changes in gender and social relations can become visible through the focus on non-formalised civil society, as Meertens study on informal networks among Colombian refugees exemplified (2004). As civil society understands refugees as an inclusive part of the local community, encounters between different social groups and individuals become visible as well.

Last but not least, studies on civil society, as forms of social organisations, show power relations that emerge around social actors, and the ties that bind them to different levels of the state and international agencies (Hann 2018, 2). This allows us to strategically connect different social actors within the refugee regime, including not only NGOs or international organisations, but also all other social organisations, which become relevant for refugees' daily lives within their country of residence. Non-formalized civil society actors link refugees and their needs and objectives with local NGOs, which are for their part embedded within the refugee regime. Thus, focussing on civil society as formalized and non-formalized actors, helps in analysing different aspects of refugee agency and the refugee regime and, furthermore, would allow researchers to problematise the complex relationship between those two concepts.

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