

The Border Event in the Everyday: Hope and Constraints in the Lives of Young Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers in Turkey

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Abstract

This article addresses the everyday lives of young male migrants in a state care facility for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Istanbul, Turkey. We focus on how the EU-Turkey Statement, which came into force in March 2016, affected the young people's options and hopes and how they responded to the resultant strengthening of border control. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul and the Aegean area between 2015 and 2016 we show how this agreement became enmeshed with the young people's life trajectories during a period of increasing authoritarianism in Turkey. While current contributions to border studies in Turkey mainly discuss new strategies of joint border management, the border spectacle of the irregular corridor to Europe and emerging humanitarian interventions at the borders, this article traces how political and legal transformations of border control trickle down to the everyday of unaccompanied minors. We suggest analysing the EU–Turkey border regime in 2015/16 as a ‘critical event’ (Das 2007) and show how violence, exclusion and humanitarianism affect young men's lives.

Keywords: unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, everyday border, critical events, refugee crisis, EU-Turkey Statement, photo elicitation

Introduction

In August 2016 Elif met Samer close to the Istanbul Yeni Camii (New Mosque) to help him enrol in one of the Syrian Temporary Education Centres (TECs) in the city.¹ Samer, a Syrian from Aleppo who was then almost 15 years old, had come to Turkey on his own two years earlier. He was extremely excited and when they passed the mosque he pulled out his camera to take some pictures. Elif had given him this camera during a photography workshop she conducted in the state care facility ÇOGEM² to allow participants to capture experiences, express emotions and finally to elicit their thoughts about hopes, anxieties and restrictions in their daily lives. When Samer showed the photos to Elif, instead of the famous mosque, which at the time was under construction, they showed the pigeons sitting on and flying from the mosque's wall (see photo 1).



Photo 1: Samer, 15, Istanbul 2016.

He grinned at her and explained: ‘I still can’t believe that I’ll carry on going to school, you know? I can dream about my future again; I can take off from this wall like the pigeons and fly. It’s not over: this is the beginning’ (Samer 15, Istanbul, August 2016).

¹ TECs were founded to provide school education for refugee children in Arabic (for details see e.g. Aras and Yasun 2016). The UNHCR estimated that there were more than 800,000 children of compulsory school age left without education in Turkey in 2016. Despite an increase in enrolment of 50 per cent or half a million Syrian refugee children since June 2016, over 40 per – or 380,000 – according to UNICEF, were still without education in January 2017 (https://www.unicef.org/media/media_94417.html, accessed 16.6.2018).

² Abbreviation for Refakatsız Mülteci Çocuklar için Çocuk ve Gençlik Merkezi (Children and Youth Centre for Unaccompanied Refugee Children).

Samer was ‘flying’ and could hardly keep still that day because one of the TECs had accepted him as a student without the Temporary Protection Identification Document (TP-ID)³ that is usually a precondition for formal access to education for school-age Syrians in Turkey. He was expecting to be allowed to attend classes and take exams and to him this felt like a decisive step towards a better future. Samer is smart, creative, learns fast and is socially competent, which enables him to quickly build reliable relationships and thus hope for a prosperous future in his new neighbourhood in Istanbul. Yet, things did not turn out quite as he hoped.

Samer arrived in 2014 when Turkey’s ‘open door’ politics (Toğral Koca 2016) in the first few years after the outbreak of war in neighbouring Syria had turned it from a transit country into the one that received the largest number of migrants in the world.⁴ In the beginning these war refugees were referred to as guests (*misafir*) and they were expected to leave after a short period of state protection. In April 2014, in the fourth year of the war in Syria, Turkey adopted a new, EU-inspired Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP).⁵ The law includes a section on ‘Temporary Protection’ that regulates emergency situations and mass influx, and it defines the category ‘Conditional Refugees’ for individual asylum seekers from *non*-European countries. Thus, with this new law Turkey continued a ‘geographical limitation’ according to which only European asylum seekers can be recognised as refugees according to the Geneva Convention. These regulations provide no option for refugees from all non-European countries to be granted long-term residence permits or citizenship and

³ For the Temporary Protection Identity Document (TP-ID) the DGMM (Directorate General for Migration Management) ‘collects biometric data, including fingerprints, during registration and maintains electronic files for each beneficiary in the agency’s electronic file management system named “Göç-Net”’ (http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkey/registration-under-temporary-protection#footnote4_to7owf1, accessed 3.7.2018).

⁴ In 2015 Turkey hosted about 2.5 million refugees from Syria and over 250,000 from other nations (UNHCR, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2544>, accessed 20.9.2018). Until September 2018 the number of registered Syrians under temporary protection increased to almost 3.56 million, about 23 per cent of whom are under 18 (UNHCR, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>, accessed 20.9.2018).

⁵ Law on Foreigners and International Protection, DGMM (Directorate General of Migration Management) (http://www.goc.gov.tr/files/files/eng_minikanun_5_son.pdf, accessed 3.7.2018).

instead act as a deterrent and facilitate repatriation (Rygiel et al. 2016, 317; Baban et al. 2017). In fact, this continuing policy of temporariness (Biner 2016) perpetuates a state of uncertain residence for all non-European asylum seekers and their children in Turkey. Registration for temporary protection with Turkish authorities has only been possible for Syrians; it formally provides them with access to education, health care, the housing market and, from 2016 onward, (very limited) access to the formal labour market and to (state-selected) citizenship⁶. All others were seen as being under conditional protection and thus registered with and provided for by the UNHCR.⁷

Samer was categorised as an unaccompanied minor, which is defined in the LFIP as a child under 18 who enters Turkey on their own or is separated from their parents after arrival. The special protection afforded to unaccompanied children seeking refuge is based on the recognition of national and international children's rights and the social construction of the child as particularly vulnerable (Malkki 2010; Lems et al. in this issue). The Turkish state has promoted the idea of children's rights since the foundation of the Republic in 1923 and it signed the Geneva Declaration of Children's Rights in 1928 (Libal 2001). In 1990, with a population comprising approximately 40 per cent at age 18 and below Turkey signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which was put into effect in 1995. In October 2015 the Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Politics published the Unaccompanied Children's Directive.⁸ Based on the LFIP and the UNCRC, it aims to do its best to include children in society regardless of their nationality, ethnic origin, religion, etc. Following this Directive, child refugees have to be placed under state care and guardianship,

⁶ According to Aljazeera and some of our research participants president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has announced that selected Syrian and Iraqi refugees who pass a screening process will be granted Turkish citizenship (Aljazeera 7.1.2017; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/erdogan-offers-citizenship-syrian-iraqi-refugees-170106195134961.html>, accessed 14.7.2018).

⁷ In September 2018 the UNHCR ended the registration of foreigners wishing to apply for international protection in Turkey (https://static.help.unhcr.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2018/09/06134921/UNHCR_ending_registration_leaflet_ENG.pdf, accessed 24.12.2018).

⁸ Refakatsız Çocuk Yönergesi 2015 (Unaccompanied Child Directive 2015) (<https://cocukhizmetleri.aile.gov.tr/duyurular/refakatsiz-cocuk-yonergesi>, accessed 20.6.2018).

sent on language courses and allowed access to schools. However, despite Turkey's early engagement with children's rights, in 2012 the UNCRC Committee, in their response to the Turkish report, rebuked Turkey for its lack of instruments to combat discrimination against refugee children.⁹

In summer 2015, those living under such uncertain protection in Turkey, including thousands of newly arriving refugees from Syria, and conditional refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran or Pakistan, crossed to Europe in increasing numbers. Although Europe does not accept a proportionate share of the world's refugees (Hansen and Randeria 2016), it declared a 'refugee crisis' in the face of people travelling through the Eastern Mediterranean Corridor and urgently called for an end to irregular migration via Turkey's shores into EU territory. Framed as crisis, debates about refugees arriving in Europe became heated and allowed interventions that would have been unlikely under conditions of normality (Roitman 2013; Strasser 2015; Lems et al. this issue). EU legal, social and political responses from then onwards were linked with the need to protect EU external borders by all available means. Despite the already existing EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement from 2012 (İçduygu and Aksel 2014; Wolff 2014, 3) negotiations of an EU–Turkey joint action plan began in November 2015 and were channelled into the EU–Turkey Statement.

The EU–Turkey border regime

The statement from March 2016, often referred to critically as the 'EU–Turkey Deal' (Rygiel et al. 2016; Soykan 2016; Tibet 2017), is 'dedicated to deepening Turkey–EU relations as well as addressing the migration crisis'.¹⁰ The agreement consists of EU policy tools that use

⁹ Periodic report to the United Nations' Committee to the Rights of the Child (CRC/C/TUR/CO 2–3: 7, 14) https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC/C/TUR/CO/2-3&Lang=En, accessed 20.6.2018.

¹⁰ Press Release on the Statement (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement>), accessed 20.3.2016).

financial incentives for readmission agreements in order to fortify the EU's external borders, deter migrants from entering the EU and return irregular migrants from the EU to third countries, where they are usually detained in removal centres financed by the EU (Wolff 2014). This is a strategy frequently employed by the EU to delegate responsibility for refugees and migrants outside of its territory. Since its implementation, there has been a heated political and public debate about this agreement to end irregular migration and the return of asylum seekers (rejected in full accordance with EU and international law) to an increasingly authoritarian state. Despite Europe's indignation about the Turkish president's governing style the 'Deal' was not discussed as a moral issue of EU irresponsibility (Perl and Strasser 2018) but as an opportunity to end the smugglers' business and prevent death in the Mediterranean.

As an incentive, the EU promised to provide six billion Euros for refugee projects in Turkey until 2019.¹¹ In return Turkey strengthened visa security, information exchange and coastguard control (also supported by this EU aid package). It was agreed that highly vulnerable Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey should be exchanged on a one-for-one basis: for each Syrian returned from Greece to Turkey another Syrian (who has never tried to cross the border informally) should be resettled from Turkey to Europe. A further incentive, yet never implemented, was the accelerated visa liberalisation procedure for Turkish citizens in the Schengen area and a new push in Turkey's EU accession talks. For the EU the Deal served to prevent refugees from crossing the border, which had become a question of safety, terrorism and EU disintegration. It simultaneously enabled the government in Turkey to amplify its power as a regional player in the Syrian war.

This Deal, and thus the EU's deflection of responsibility for refugees to an increasingly authoritarian Turkey, caused a fierce reaction among local and international human rights

¹¹ European Commission/Fact Sheet (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-4321_en.htm, accessed 3.7.2018).

activists, humanitarian organisations and academics but was backed by the UNHCR as an appropriate management solution to control chaos.¹² The EU decision-makers ignored concerns and gave in to pressure from a growing right-wing populism. Border control, readmission agreements and tackling smuggling prevail in the EU agenda on migration at the cost of compliance with fundamental human rights (Carrera et al. 2015, 2).

Despite – or perhaps precisely because of – the global moral outcry in September 2015 and the short period of porousness of the EU–Turkey border and the Balkan Route, the protection (i.e. militarisation) of the EU’s external borders has been intensified and the number of passages had gone down in spring 2016.¹³ Yet, in contrast to the expected high numbers of removals from Greece and resettlement to Europe, the figures remained very low in the following years.¹⁴ In 2017 the EU hailed 9,000 cases of resettlement as a success (while the number of refugees in Turkey climbed to 3.56 million) and proclaimed that they would help with refugees particularly in those countries who are committed and reliable in the readmission agreements.¹⁵ Furthermore, this irresponsible strategy of keeping people outside the EU has become the model for the future EU border regime. Interestingly, the EU-Turkey Statement does not even mention children or unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in its document, and whether unaccompanied children are returned or resettled in the context of the readmission agreement remains unclear (Beirens and Clewett 2016).

¹² UNHCR on EU-Turkey Deal (<http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2016/3/56ec533e9/unhcr-eu-turkey-deal-asylum-safeguards-must-prevail-implementation.html>, accessed 25.6.2018).

¹³ Annual Report on the Facility for Refugees in Turkey COM(2017)130 final (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/170302_facility_for_refugees_in_turkey_first_annual_report.pdf, accessed 14.7.2018).

¹⁴ According to the think tank ESI (European Stability Initiative) from April 2016 to the end of 2017, 1,485 migrants were returned to Turkey, the largest number (386) in the first month. The average number of people returned to Turkey in these 21 months was 71 a month (<https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/ESI%20core%20facts%20-%20Greece%20Refugees%20Asylum%20-%2026%20January%202018.pdf>, accessed 16.6.2018).

¹⁵ Seventh Report from the European Commission on the progress of the EU-Turkey Statement (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20170906_seventh_report_on_the_progress_in_the_implementation_of_the_eu-turkey_statement_en.pdf, accessed 20.6.2018).

The event and the everyday

There are currently many contributions to border studies in and on Turkey itself (Akyüz et al. 2014) as well as on Turkey in relation to Europe. These mainly discuss new strategies of joint border management (Kaşlı 2014; Gedikkaya Bal 2016; Rygiel et al. 2016; Soykan 2016), the border spectacle of the irregular corridor to Europe and the EU-Turkey Statement (Perl and Strasser 2018; De Genova 2017; Topak 2014) and the emerging humanitarian interventions at EU borders (İşleyen 2018; Ticktin 2016). In this article, however, we aim to analyse how the EU-Turkey Statement trickled down to the everyday of our research participants and thus show how a ‘border event’ appears in ordinary lives (Das 2007, 2018; Yuval-Davis et al. 2017). We explore how the EU–Turkey border regime shaped struggles, hopes and constraints in the lives of young men registered as unaccompanied children and living in a state care facility in Istanbul. Tracing these young migrants’ lives allows us to rethink the violence of the Mediterranean border regime, the arbitrariness of its different effects and the ambiguity of the notion of unaccompanied minors living under uncertain and temporary protection.

Engaging with the agency of young people who have experienced displacement demands a language that is sufficiently sensitive and strong to grasp the meaning of violent occurrences in ordinary lives. Veena Das’ research on violence during the formation of the postcolonial Indian nation state provides the ethnographic groundwork for a theoretical understanding of violence as eventful history in the present of the everyday. Her representation is ‘one that is not seen as bearing an objective witness to the events’ (2007, 5) but rather one that locates the subjects and shows what it is ‘to live in this very place of devastation’ (2007, 6). Veena Das describes ‘the event as attached to the everyday’ as much as she thinks of the ‘everyday as eventful’ (2007, 8). Her work inspired us to rethink the occurrences of displacement and flight in 2015/16 as a ‘critical event’. Events stand out as critical when they entail radical shifts in

discursive formations, state institutions as well as ways of thinking and acting. Yet, in contrast to ‘crisis’, which is often depicted as an unexpected, unprecedented and uncontrollable state of exemption, we, with Veena Das, see the critical event as intertwined with the everyday. This allows the ethnographer to observe the eventful history in the gestures, the said and unsaid in everyday life (Lems et al. this issue).

Nira Yuval-Davis suggests that we can observe the normalisation of processes of border control in the everyday – whether in times of peace or war, whether in schools or refugee camps. Everyday bordering thus describes the transfer of border control to the daily lives of ordinary people, which transforms teachers, doctors, house owners and employers into untrained border guards (Yuval-Davis et al. 2017). In this article, we rethink the extraordinary of the border events through its intertwinement with the everyday and suggest delocalising the border and its control (Topak 2014; Green 2012). This allows studying the border event among people living not at the edge of a nation state but ‘in the very place of devastation’ (Das 2007, 6).

We explore how the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016, as a major tool in the reorganisation and reinforcement of the EU border regime, is intertwined with the hopes and fears, inclusion and exclusion as well as restriction and freedom of individual subjects. We show how the statement, embedded in a series of violent occurrences (war and armed violence in Turkey, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, including the expansion of the Islamic State, suicide and car bombings in all these countries and the failed coup d’état in Turkey in July 2016), is part of a ‘critical event’ that trickles down to the everyday life of young unaccompanied migrants. Our focus is not the horror and panic of crossing the border with its violent control but the question of ‘what happens to the subject and world when the memory of such events is folded into ongoing relationships’ (Das 2007, 8). Tracing young migrants’ lives and replacing ‘crisis’

with an eventful history will reveal the enormous efforts they make under the condition of uncertain protection to secure a better future.

Studying everyday lives

After we visited the state care facility for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and introduced our research project in June 2015 staff members supported our application to the Ministry of Family and Social Policy for a research permit. To our surprise, Elif received the permit promptly, and right away she started conducting radio shows and photography workshops to create the setting for the participatory approach of this fieldwork. At first, she went there once a week and met with groups comprising between two and ten participants, all male and (independent of their national background) categorised as unaccompanied refugee children (*refakatsız mülteci çocuklar*) by the state. They came from various countries, including Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Palestine, Iran and Iraq. One participant, Abdi Deeq from Somalia, who had learned Arabic, English, Farsi and Turkish during his irregular travels, gradually took on the role of a research assistant, organising the meetings, helping translate from and to different languages and explaining contexts. He turned out to be a great research assistant and a highly gifted visual artist.

Participants at these gatherings decided on the topics, conducted interviews amongst them, discussed and translated lyrics, and sang, rapped or selected their favourite songs on YouTube. The production of shows provided a distraction but also an opportunity for the deep exchange of experiences and for building trust among the youths living together in the facility and with the researcher. Some of the participants turned out to be remarkable entertainers; others were talented in sports or the arts. Not all the young men were interested, and some participated only irregularly or moved on towards Europe after one meeting. Furthermore, Elif conducted video and photography workshops and encouraged participants to take pictures

outside of the workshops. These photos were later used to conduct open-ended and non-directive interviews. This method of photo elicitation (Harper 2002) allows the participants to define the theme and to interpret freely. Responsibility grew out of these meetings, and the exchange of skills in photography, film and radio in this research allowed the productive integration of arts into the young people's daily life of waiting (O'Neill 2008).

Although there was much tension and violence in the facility, it was mostly neither national, ethnic or religious. The problems the young people had to struggle with related more to insomnia, aggression and auto-aggression. Haunted by memories of the loss of families and friends they worried about access to education, the right to stay and to work or more generally about their futures. They shared experiences of anger, anxiety, despair and, as one young man expressed it, a '*lack of appetite for food and living*'.

The research focus on youths in the state care facility for unaccompanied children allowed the study of a huge range of identity formations and skills among underage asylum seekers. Transit countries in general, Turkey in particular and the EU border regime as lived experience, remembered and told by unaccompanied minor refugees, is still an under-researched area in the field of migration, unaccompanied youths and ethnography (Vacchiano and Jiménez 2012; Uehling 2008).

Samer's school of life: the border in the everyday

Samer had a relatively difficult start in Turkey. After crossing from Syria to Hatay in south-eastern Turkey and working in a restaurant for a while, Samer managed to reach Istanbul in late summer 2014. He had only 50 Turkish Lira in his pocket but remembered that '*I wasn't scared because I trusted my survival skills.*' By day he explored the city and at night he slept on the streets. On his third day in Istanbul police officers noticed him and took him to the police department. After he was interrogated and registered, the apparently sympathetic

officers accompanied him to the state care facility in the borough of Kadıköy, where he would live for the next year.

Under the aegis of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy and staffed with a director, a social worker, a psychologist, a teacher as well as cooking and cleaning personnel, the three-story house offers space for 65 to 70 male youths. It has a dormitory for up to 12, one TV and one bathroom on each floor and a communal dining room on the ground floor where three meals a day are served. Residents are free to come and go during daytime but are excluded when they do not obey the rules of the house. Youths rarely came to the ÇOGEM on their own, but were mostly, like Samer, picked up on the streets and brought there by the police. For many the ÇOGEM provides somewhere to live until they turn 18; at which point they are no longer seen as children with exceptional rights.

In autumn 2015, many young people saw the ÇOGEM in Kadıköy as a last stop before crossing to Europe. Nonetheless, some who were awaiting resettlement by the UNHCR were hesitant about moving on informally because they knew they would have been removed from the UNHCR list if found guilty of illegal border crossing. Others, like Samer, who could not afford to pay for passage to Europe, decided to stay in Istanbul, earn some money, finish school and move on later. In what follows we explore how the border regime and children's protection schemes became entangled with his plans and preparations for freedom and education.

Once established at the ÇOGEM, Samer started to learn Turkish with the employees and picked it up quickly. He settled into the neighbourhood easily and began thinking about his next steps. His father had died the year before and he had had to support his mother and siblings back in Aleppo ever since. *'I have to work. I am born to work!'* He entered the informal labour market for children as a textile worker but remained focused on getting a formal education.

Until summer 2015 the social worker and psychologist at the ÇOGEM were keen to help their young residents to enrol in school, to teach them Turkish and to organise resettlement with the UNHCR. Yet, with the increasing number of young migrants who arrived at the facility and disappeared within days during the summer and autumn of 2015, they had their hands full.

When Elif arrived and started her radio shows in October, staff members seemed to welcome her as a volunteer who would support them with their heavy workload. Samer regularly joined in with Elif's activities and hoped that she would find the time to help him. Both, the anthropologist and the student, were interested in the Syrian Temporary Education Centres (TECs) and tried to contact some in order to learn more about their system and particularly about Samer's options for accessing schooling (Aras and Yasun 2016). They found one that was ready to waive its fees and which was close enough to the facility to be able to cover the daily transport costs to school.

Yet, in the very week that Elif and Samer met in order to go to the TEC, Elif noticed how the atmosphere changed and became even tenser when in November the staff were presented with new instructions from the Ministry of Family and Social Policy: Syrian youths had to be transferred from the state care facility for unaccompanied children in Kadıköy to the Adana Sarıçam camp (Tibet 2017). The staff at the facility and in Adana provided no documentation but told Elif that the order had come unexpectedly and from '*the very top*'. According to the explanations of the staff at the ÇOGEM and other, non-governmental migrant and refugee organisations, when preparations for the Deal began the government began to remove its migrant population from the west, thus preventing them from reaching the Aegean border.

The growing tension affected the young residents in the facility: there was more fighting and auto-aggression, and one young man even attempted suicide. Samer tried to prevent his transfer to Adana but the order came and all the youths of Syrian background were forcibly displaced on the authority of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, legally protected by

provisions based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and apparently ‘in their best interest’ (UNCRC). It was in the name of this ‘protection’ that he was not allowed to leave the camp, to work or to send money to his family in Aleppo. There were no language courses, no education, but, as he said, ‘just terrible food’, dirty toilets and no space or privacy.

This place [a refugee camp in Adana] was like a barn (ahır). I cried nearly every day about my terrible life. It was humiliating to be there. You know, going from the seaside at Kadıköy to the camp in Adana makes you feel as if you fell off a donkey. I hadn't realised that we had been living so close to the edge. (Samer 15, Istanbul, August 2016; photos 2 and 3)



Photo 2: Samer, Istanbul 2016. Photo 3: Samer found this photograph of Adana Sariçam camp on the internet.

Samer and other Syrian youths transferred to the Adana camp obviously perceived their stay there as neither equal treatment nor ‘in their best interest’ (Allsopp and Chase 2017; Eastmond and Ascher 2011; Yılmaz 2014). After five months of restrictions, several of the young protected refugees took matters in their own hands: they burned down the children’s tents. Samer used the opportunity and ran away from the camp. Of course, he paid a high price: he lost his phone and thus his contacts with friends and family and was no longer

perceived as vulnerable child but instead as a threatening young man (Ticktin 2016; Malkki 2010) and they had to leave behind their Temporary Protection IDs – the precondition of residence rights, free health treatment as well as access to school and shelter. Nonetheless, Samer did not regret his decision: *‘I do not even want to think about the possibility of still being there in the camp; the most annoying experience of my life, much worse than the war itself’* (Istanbul, August 2016).

In March 2016, when Samer returned to Istanbul, the EU-Turkey Statement had just been publicly announced and border crossings drastically restricted. Europe ceased to represent hope for the future. He could not risk going back to the ÇOGEM and being sent back to Adana, so he moved in to his cousin’s place. It was easy for him to find work in a Syrian sweatshop again, and although the work was informal, poorly paid and terribly ‘annoying’, it allowed him to earn some money.

Nonetheless, Samer’s lack of ID greatly increased the risk of being deported. It also meant that when Elif contacted him again in summer 2016 he had very little chance of getting an education. They immediately tried to find a convenient school, since he was about to turn 15, the age limit for entering school in Turkey. In August 2016, for a second time they found another school and so met outside the mosque to finally enrol Samer in a Syrian Temporary Education Centre (TEC) that was ready to accept him without documentation. This was the day when Samer took the photo of the pigeons and hoped a better life was about to begin. He started at the school while also working in an Arab bookshop run by one of Elif’s friends and thus could continue to send remittances to his family. This, he thought, was a new beginning.

TECs have been opened throughout Turkey, in Istanbul mainly in the rather conservative districts of Fatih and Başakşehir, to provide refugee children with an education following the

Syrian curriculum and thus to avoid a lost generation.¹⁶ During the first years of the war when the assumption that ‘guests’ (*misafir*) would soon return to Syria still prevailed, the Turkish state and Syrian families preferred a Syrian education for their children in their native language. In the entrances of these schools, huge posters expressed gratitude to Turkey for supporting the education of their children: ‘Thank you, Turkey, for saving me twice. Both, from death and from ignorance!’ And Samer was grateful to the school that offered him an education and ignored the fact that he was lacking the necessary official documentation.

Yet, in the context of the EU-Turkey Statement and the disbursement of the first three of six billion Euros, the EU urged Turkey to get more refugee students into school and ‘integrate’ them in the Turkish curriculum. Luckily, Samer’s school opted out and decided to collaborate with the Yemenite Embassy in order to at least remain an Arabic school; thus he could stay there and not re-register with the Turkish authorities (which would have been impossible without ID). However, he had to pay higher fees for his Yemenite private school and at the end of the first year he could not take the final exam because the Embassy would not allow him to enter the building without ID. Elif and Samer did not give up and found a third Syrian school to accept him and this one was even free. Then, against all expectations, the Adana administration released him from state protection and sent his registration and identity card to Istanbul. He was declared adult at the age of 16, and was no longer under state protection.

Having entered the TEC before the age of 15, he now could go to a Turkish school: ‘*When I see birds, all I can think of is freedom, and freedom in my opinion can only be achieved through education; without education I will be trapped in this sweatshop all my life. Can you imagine how boring that life would be?*’ Now, he could finally go to school and sit exams.

¹⁶ TECs needed to be accredited by a protocol signed by the Ministry of Education and an NGO (functioning as a body maintaining the school). Every refugee between the ages of 6 and 15 who is registered and thus has a temporary identity card number (*kimlik*) is legally entitled to enrol in a school (Decree of the Turkish Ministry of National Education dated 23 September 2014, http://www.ilkergedik.net/uploads/dokuman/2014-21%20say_1_%20genelge.pdf, accessed 17.1.2019)

However, a couple of months later, Samer lost his job, dropped out of school and disappeared; we still do not know if he went back to his family in Aleppo, crossed the border to Europe or just went underground in Istanbul.

The border agreement between the EU and Turkey entered his life and like tentacles became entwined with his everyday experiences, preventing him from moving on to alternative life trajectories. In Samer's experiences, borders did not remain at the edge of a nation state, but became entangled with the city, the camp and even school. After he fled the war in Aleppo in 2014, it was the transforming EU border regime in 2015/16 that caused his second displacement, to Adana in 2015, and all the hardship he experienced in his attempt to become an ordinary student. The privileging of children rights that had contributed to his protection in Istanbul also contributed, shaped by the border event, to his displacement and restrictions in the Adana camp. The freedom that Samer imagined for the pigeons when he took the picture in front of the mosque on his way to school was obviously not meant for him. On that day at the mosque he hoped for a pleasant future with an education and job opportunities. Yet, things turned out differently: he was forcibly relocated, lost his ID, was excluded from exams, tried again, failed again and, finally, like approximately 380,000 other Syrian children of compulsory school age in Turkey in the year 2016,¹⁷ he ended up without a diploma.

Ramin at risk or a risk? A traveller between borders

'No, not by boat, I was swimming!' Ramin smirked at his amazed audience – unaccompanied youths from Somalia, Congo and Afghanistan plus Elif – sitting with him around the dining room table in the ÇOGEM in October 2015. Ramin told them how he had tried to cross to Samos, a Greek Island close to Turkish shores:

¹⁷ UNICEF Annual Report 2016 (https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Turkey_2016_COAR.pdf, accessed 17.1.2018).

It was only three kilometres! And together with four friends, we thought we were strong enough. We actually thought that it was going to be easy! But the wind, it just got worse and worse, and the waves changed. And the current was so strong, it kept pushing us back to Turkey. We were in the sea for nearly nine hours. I had all my belongings wrapped in a plastic bag. I had three dates in my pocket to rescue me in case my blood sugar went down. I thought about the dates: What happens if the others get hungry too? Should I share one of my dates? Or should I keep them all for myself? Then one man, in front of me drowned. We couldn't help him; we were in the same situation. I panicked and I said to myself: 'This is it. I am dying.' 'Even the dates can't save me!', I said to myself, till the fishermen came and rescued us. It was a miracle (mucize).

We had met Ramin, a young man aged 16 with Iranian citizenship, during our first visit to the state care facility in Kadıköy, in June 2015. He had been there for more than a year, since early 2014. Polite, neatly dressed, talkative and obviously interested in international guests, he immediately started a conversation about our countries of residence and options for getting there. He was particularly curious about visa issues, languages and perception of immigrants. His plan seemed to be very clear: he wanted to learn German and Japanese (as an Azeri he had learned Turkish quickly) and then he planned to move on to Germany or to the UK. 'Why?', we asked. 'Because they have the best football teams in Europe! My friend plays for Arsenal now!' But he did not have much time left: 'I have no training here and I am getting older.' Shortly after this conversation he took a bus to Kuşadası on the Aegean coast and risked his life by swimming over the Mycale Strait to Samos in August 2015, during the peak of informal border crossing in the Eastern Mediterranean Corridor.

In what follows we explore how his life trajectories were interwoven with border events, with irregular border crossing, border management and violent as much as humanitarian border surveillance. He knew that once he turned 18, as an Iranian he would be deported or have to live in Turkey as a 'sans papier'. He had little hope of resettlement because international

attention had turned to Syrian war refugees and the resettlement programmes for other underage people were on hold. But he dreamt of a successful professional career in Europe and was held back, in his view, by borders that over time transformed him into what is commonly called a ‘smuggler’. From a young traveller at risk with dreams of a football career he was turned into what the public depicts as a threatening clandestine figure, a risk, particularly for Europe. However, amidst this transformation, he remained the same neatly dressed, polite young man with the dream of a good life and a successful career. We will show how Ramin’s life was affected by the transforming EU–Turkey border regime in 2015/16, the threat of turning 18 and the effort to take care of himself, often discussed as agency in the literature on unaccompanied minor refugees (Orgocka 2012; Chase 2010).

Ramin is a ‘traveller between borders’ (Khosravi 2010) and started his biographical narration contemplating a football photo (photo 4). In 2012, he left his Iranian hometown in the Azeri part of the country at the age of 13 in order to play football in one of the bigger cities in the south. In 2013 his aunt suggested going to Turkey to become a professional player and earn ‘*real money*’. Later that same year, Ramin crossed the border from Iran to Turkey in a bus to Istanbul, legally. A couple of days after his arrival he showed up at the Galatasaray stadium, asked for the trainer and was allowed in to show them his talent. They wanted to hire him as a goalkeeper but sent him back to his country in order to ask permission from his parents.



Photo 4: Abdi Deeq, Istanbul 2015.

When Ramin, now 15, arrived in Istanbul for the second time in spring 2014, he had almost no money left and he could not reach any trainers at Galatasaray. So he literally walked to the Fenerbahçe stadium, met a youth coach there and was promptly accepted onto the team. He was given a Fenerbahçe shirt and put onto their training programme.

His father's brother had told Ramin about a step-uncle in Istanbul who was wealthy enough that the family expected him to support Ramin in the beginning. His uncle eventually showed up once Ramin had joined the team, at which point, he said, he had *'only one Lira left in my pocket'*. His uncle gave him some money, covered the fees for the Iranian school in Istanbul and offered him a job in his jewellery shop in the Grand Bazar. Ramin was happy, trained in the club for hours every day and when his visa expired he declared himself an unaccompanied minor seeking refuge, thus allowing him to stay in Turkey. He moved into the ÇOGEM. *'It was the easiest thing to do: I got meals and didn't have to pay and it was close to the Fenerbahçe pitch. I was in the club the whole day anyway, so why bother with hotel costs!'*, he explained. Yet, there was an unintended consequence of this decision: refugees cannot get a football licence in Turkey; you are only allowed to play if you have a residence permit, and a residence permit can only be issued to adults, not to minors. Not even the administration at Fenerbahçe or his uncle could help. Eventually, he lost his place in the team and thus was prevented from getting a contract and the successful life he had planned. But these hardships turned him, he said, *'into a real man'*. At the age of 16 he was the pleasant youth who needed protection as well as the real man who could take care of himself. His life began to oscillate between the Children and Youth Centre for unaccompanied minors and the removal centre for informal travellers.

In summer 2015, he left the football team in Turkey and immediately prepared his next step: Although he could not continue his training, he did not give up his dream. He prepared with

four friends to swim to Europe. Yet, as mentioned earlier, he barely survived this adventure in the Mycale Strait. After he had been rescued by a fisherman, he was imprisoned at a removal centre for two weeks. Due to his age he was taken back to the facility in Istanbul. He realised that like everybody else he would need to pay smugglers in order to cross borders. Yet, he did not trust them.

After he had almost died he began to use another of his talents to safeguard his trip to Europe: coordinating, networking, organising, socialising. It was his friendship with an Iranian child in the facility in Istanbul that paved the way to clandestine networks, at a moment when his future seemed to be blocked by border control in the course of a developing EU-Turkey agreement. This young Iranian boy needed '*protection against several Afghans harassing him*' in the facility and since Ramin liked him he took him under his wing. When the boy was picked up by his mother, it turned out that his family were rich. His mother liked Ramin and convinced him to support her transfer of money to Iran. Ramin had the right job in the Bazar for doing transfers and used his position to become the middleman for these transactions. In autumn 2015, after he had failed to cross and was back in Istanbul, he was also asked to deposit money for refugees in the shop account until they arrived at European shores, and the money was to be given to the smugglers only in the event of a successful passage. If something went wrong the money was given back to the customer (referred to as fish or sheep) or their relatives. Having got to know the informal networks in this way, he helped a couple of friends and organised their passage for very little money. Then he was asked by people less close to him and slowly started 'to send fish and sheep' to Greece and Italy himself. Later he met a man who knew how to fake passports and when he started to collaborate with him they charged 6,000 Dollars for a trip from the Aegean to the UK via Italy, including the passport. He had earned enough money to buy a house for his mother in Iran and had a rather comfortable life in Istanbul when Elif met him again in autumn 2016. He talked in detail about the endless nights without sleep when he had sent people to Greece and

did not hear back from them. *‘But so far, they’ve all arrived; one came back, but alive’*. He laughed and added: *‘The only one who doesn’t make it is me’* (picture 5).



Photo 5: Ramin, Aegean Sea 2016

Ramin was arrested a second time when he tried to cross by boat in summer 2016 (photo 5).

The captain of the wooden boat turned around halfway to Italy and went back to Turkey.

There was a problem with a client’s payment; his relatives had withdrawn the money for the passage from the deposit that was supposed to be transferred to the smugglers after the journey. The smugglers shouted at the client and one of them threw him into the water. *‘No, he didn’t die: they picked him up after a while’*, Ramin added quickly, seeing Elif’s horrified expression. When they arrived at the Turkish coast they were detected by the coastguard and arrested. Ramin insisted he was Afghan and went on hunger strike with about 200 people at the removal centre. After three weeks of protest and with the support of a lawyer from a local human’s rights association about 100 of them were set free. *‘That’s what they do with Afghans: they can’t send them back; they just set them free.’* Iranians are usually deported, and while saying this he was grinning mischievously. It seems he could not have cared less: *‘If they deport me that’s fine; I’d stay for one or two days to visit my parents and then come back.’* After his life story was told and recorded he said goodbye to Elif and for one last time he emphasised that he would make it to Italy this time and that he would go to England from there and start a career as a football player.

Ramin's story reveals different aspects of how the border event attaches to unaccompanied minors' life trajectories. It is the everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al. 2017) introduced with the Law on Foreigners and International Protection in 2014 that prevents him from working on his dream of playing football in Turkey. The lack of a residence permit as well as of the hope for resettlement urged him to risk his life before he turned 18 and lose the status of unaccompanied minor. Due to his failure to cross to Europe by swimming and his fear of smugglers he became entangled in the business of facilitating passages himself. The border event of 2015/16 and the EU-Turkey Statement increased the risk of being imprisoned and deported at the border for 'fish and sheep' as well as for facilitators. Those who still accept the danger of crossing under the stricter controls of borderlands are shifting their passage to more dangerous and expensive routes.

Conclusion

When we started this research the so-called 'EU refugee crisis' was at its peak and by the end of 2015 about one million people had reached Europe by sea. Of these, 80 per cent came via the Eastern Mediterranean Corridor from Turkey to Greece. This border event had to be depicted as 'crisis' to allow decisions unthinkable in times of normality. In 2016, the EU responded by militarising the Aegean border, and with a readmission and resettlement agreement with Turkey as well as financial incentives, all agreed upon in the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016. The Deal was set up to prevent people from travelling across the Aegean and thus to reduce the number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe. In order to fulfil the requirements of this deal, the Turkish government began deportations from coastal areas and fortified control in collaboration with EU institutions.

We traced unaccompanied minor asylum seekers' hopes and constraints and their efforts to establish a better life in Turkey. Engaging with the border event at the Aegean and its effects

on young men's everyday lives allowed rethinking the violence of the Mediterranean border regime. We suggest that the spectacle at the border has spread tentacles, creating a delocalised 'place of devastation' which we analysed by following the subjects' narrations and everyday experiences across different sites. From these narrations and shared experiences in the everyday of this ethnographic field we draw several conclusions for the understanding of border events in everyday lives.

Minor asylum seekers are depicted as particularly vulnerable because of their age and because they travel across borders without relatives. Analysing effects of the border event in the ordinary of their lives shows how the protection that is meant to safeguard underage migrants can at times be transformed into restrictions. Although their young age helps them to be taken care of by the state it does not protect them from being rejected and declared undesirable subjects by the border regime at the age of 18.

Turkey as a transit and destination country gives young migrants on the run shelter in care facilities and offers them uncertain and temporary protection. However, as soon as they want to move on, the border tentacles hold them back: in order to satisfy the EU-Turkey Deal's requirements authorities do not hesitate to imprison protected youth in camps or removal centres. The EU-Turkey Statement forces migrants to perceive Turkey as a destination rather than a transit country, in spite of Turkey's authoritarian government and its uncertain capacity to protect refugee children and youth.

Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Turkey places minors, such as Samer and Ramin, in state care facilities for children and youth or in segregated spaces within state-controlled temporary housing or camps. While both young men established an everyday life in the Children and Youth Centre in Istanbul, Samer protested against but could not prevent his unexpected deportation by the Turkish state to the refugee camp in Adana in the course of the preparation of the Deal. This ruined his plans for education and his journey to

Europe. Instead of hospitality and protection he experienced his treatment in the camp as hostility and restriction. Samer was snatched away from his new home in Kadıköy in November 2015 just at the moment when he had found a school that was ready to accept him. In the same year Ramin had to give up on the dream of playing professional football in Turkey that he would have done anything to achieve. Not long after that he risked his life several times for the hope of a better future in Europe. Whereas there was a possible prospect in Turkey for Samer as a Syrian refugee, Ramin, a migrant who would be considered an ‘illegal’ traveller after having passed the threshold of age 18, had almost no future, except for an irregular life that he took up after his first attempt to cross the Mediterranean.

We have shown that children and youth are protected by the UN Convention. However, this protection, intertwined with the border regime, causes rather than combats vulnerability in the everyday lives of minor asylum seekers. Samir’s and Ramin’s destinies and aims were inextricably entangled with the fortification of the joint EU–Turkey border regime in 2015. The border event produced tentacles that reached into the young migrants’ lives, despite their efforts and risks, and slowly shaped their dreams, hopes and actions for a better future.

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