

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Encounters in the Turkey-Syria Borderland by Bezen BALAMİR
COŞKUN and Selin YILDIZ NIELSEN

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Source: *Uluslararası İlişkiler / International Relations*, 2020, Vol. 17, No. 68, Special Issue:
Revisiting Migration in International Relations / Özel Sayı: Uluslararası İlişkilerde Göçü
Yeniden Değerlendirmek (2020), pp. 185-187

Published by: Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi İktisadi İşletmesi

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26980744>

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BOOK REVIEW

Bezen BALAMIR COSKUN and Selin YILDIZ NIELSEN,
Encounters in the Turkey-Syria Borderland

(Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing,
2018)

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To cite this book review: Birgul Demirtas, Book Review: “Bezen Balamir Coskun and Selin Yildiz Nielsen, *Encounters in the Turkey-Syria Borderland*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 17, No. 68, 2020, pp. 185-187.

Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi Derneği | International Relations Council of Turkey
Uluslararası İlişkiler – Journal of International Relations
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Encounters in the Turkey-Syria Borderland

Bezen BALAMİR COŞKUN – Selin YILDIZ NIELSEN

Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, ISBN (10): 1-5275-1402-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1402-7

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The civil war in Syria has continued for nine years without any prospect of a short-term resolution in sight. There currently exists an immense body of literature on topics regarding the Syrian conflict, the resulting flow of refugees, and Turkey's policies regarding these issues. However, the ways in which the Syrian quagmire and subsequent refugee crisis have been experienced at the local have not been adequately addressed. This book is authored by two scholars who, after getting their PhD's abroad, worked in Gaziantep and directly witnessed and experienced the socio-economic and humanitarian impact of the Syrian crisis in this borderland city.

The book consists of six parts: The first examines the history of Syria and the Syrian civil war. The second part analyzes Turkey's migratory history and its management of different migration movements. The third looks at Turkey's policies towards Syrian refugees specifically, and attempts to answer the question of whether Ankara's attitude towards refugees has been impacted by its prioritization of national security or humanitarianism. The history of Gaziantep and impact of the influx of Syrian refugees on the city is the topic of the fourth part. Parts five and six make up the core of the book and further elaborate on the authors' personal experiences in Gaziantep and their perspectives on the impact of the Syrian war on the city and specifically their universities. This detailed ethnographic and oral history is the primary contribution this book makes to the existing body of literature.

Within the first part, the authors provide brief background information on the history of modern Syria and the Syrian conflict. Although Syria's full history is extensive, the authors begin their telling of the country's modern history starting with the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided the Middle Eastern territories between two colonial powers: Britain and France. At the end of the First World War, Syria was given to France by mandate. However, France withdrew and Syria gained its independence in 1946 following a series of Syrian uprisings. The Baas regime took control of the government in 1957. This section of the book illustrates how the Hafiz Al-Assad regime built a half-Islamic half-secular regime in the country through its control of the Sunni majority. Following the death of Hafiz Al-Assad in 2000, his son Bashar Al-Assad became the new President of Syria. During the early stages of his presidency he was expected to implement economic and political reforms, however, his mishandling of the government's response to public demonstrations in 2011 destroyed those hopes.

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Spilling over of the widespread uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the first protest movement in Syria started in Derra province in March of 2011. Demonstrators called on the regime to release 14 children from jail who had been arrested after writing “People want a regime change” on a wall. Demonstrations spread to other provinces and security forces were instructed to use violence as a means of ending the protests. This sparked a spiral of violence, which has resulted in the ongoing civil war. The use of conventional and chemical weapons by the Al-Assad regime has led to the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians, making the Syrian Civil War one of the deadliest conflicts of the post-Second World War era.

In the second section, the authors analyze Turkey’s history of migration. After stating that both the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey accepted migrants from different territories, the authors argue that Turkey’s migration policy is not only the result of humanitarian policies, but also socio-economic and security concerns. Turkey’s retaining geographical limits in regards to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol is regarded as being a result of these concerns. The section also details and analyzes several legal institutional changes with regard to asylum seekers in Turkey since the 1990’s.

The third section covers Ankara’s attitude towards Syrian refugees. It also examines anti-Syrian refugee demonstrations in border cities, including Gaziantep. The increasing number of refugees in Turkish border cities has led to unrest. This is because of claims that the current housing and employment crises can be attributed to the rise of the Syrian refugee population. For example, one anti-refugee group in Gaziantep started a social media campaign with the slogan: “we do not want Syrians in our city.” Several groups even went so far as to throw stones at Syrian individuals. According to the authors, this unrest indicates that Turkey’s current refugee policies cannot be sustained in the mid and long-term. Considering the radical changes seen in Turkey’s refugee policies in the early months of 2020, which encourage movement toward European countries via borders openings, it seems these predictions are proving accurate.

The historical and socio-economic characteristics of Gaziantep are covered in the following section. In stating the importance of Gaziantep’s geopolitical position near the Syrian border, the authors emphasize their own ethnographic narrative as both of them worked in Gaziantep before and during the Syrian conflict. They highlight the fact that Gaziantep’s population has doubled in recent years and the repercussions regarding local attitudes towards refugees. The authors refer to this as a “demographic shock.” The people of Gaziantep have begun to blame Syrians for the city’s problems: from traffic jams to infectious diseases. This has been accompanied by a constant fear of potential terrorist attack.

In the fifth and sixth sections, the authors narrate their personal experiences in Gaziantep before and after the start of the Syrian Civil War. One of the authors, Dr. Bezen Balamir Coşkun, recounts her invitation to the signing ceremony in Aleppo for the visa liberalization policy between Turkey and Syria. This was just a few weeks after she began to work in Gaziantep. Additionally, before the war, she visited the University of Aleppo for a study visit in which scholars from Gaziantep and Aleppo had the opportunity to discuss curriculum development and joint projects. All that remained from these more peaceful times was a mug gifted to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Balamir Coşkun. by a scholar from the University of Aleppo.

Additionally, there were Syrian students studying at universities in Gaziantep before the war. However, after war began, these students lost communication with their families in Syria. The students began experiencing feelings of anxiety and concern for their loved ones. Dr. Balamir Coşkun rightly states that the university staff did not have the appropriate training or resources to help their Syrian students cope with this unforeseen trauma. Eventually, the students' anxiety evolved into nervous breakdowns and neither the academics nor the psychological counseling office could provide appropriate support.

Dr. Selin Yıldız Nielsen then details her personal narrative, explaining how Syrians in Gaziantep experienced the horrors of war and had their lives drastically changed as a result. Her encounters with Syrian refugees and their children in Gaziantep indicate how quickly conflict turns the lives of individuals upside down and the difficulties associated with processing the horrors of war. Her narrative about Aimar is especially noteworthy. Aimar was educated at the Aleppo Music Conservatory. Before the war, he was working in the Aleppo Symphony Orchestra as an oud specialist. Dr. Nielsen and Aimar visited the music department of a university in Gaziantep in order to help him look for a job. After listening to him, the chair of the department was impressed by Aimar's talent. However, because Aimar was unable to take his diploma and other forms of documentation with him to Gaziantep when he was forced to flee Syria, he was ineligible to work at the university. This incident depicts just one of the difficulties associated with forced migration. Even a university graduate, with a strong educational background, can have his history and achievements erased by forced migration.

In this ethnographic book, the authors recount their personal "odysseys" in the border city. The scholars, both having received their PhD's from universities in the UK and the USA, worked in Gaziantep, and experienced the impacts of the Syrian Civil War, demonstrate how a violent conflict in a neighboring country is felt in a border city. Although a number of works exist on Turkey's migration policies, there is a need in the body of literature for works that further analyze the experiences of individuals at the local level and share those ethnographic narratives. This book helps to fill that gap and provides a foundation for future studies on this topic.