Syrian Displacement, Gender and Boundary-Making in the Turkish Borderlands

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Abstract

This article presents a reflexive ethnographic analysis of 'refugee lives' and borders and boundary-making in the Turkish borderlands. Since 2011, the humanitarian crisis as a result of the Syrian civil war, and the arrival at the European border zones of refugees crossing the Mediterranean, have occupied the news outlets of the world. Today the European Union and Turkey look for permanent 'solutions' and emphasize 'integration' as a durable response to forced migration. This essay explores reflexive dimensions of long-term-fieldwork with Syrian refugees at the Turkey-Syria border through an analysis of ethnographic encounters and the politics of belonging and place-making. Borders are often contested spaces that complicate the researcher's positionality, which oscillates between a politically engaged subject position and the 'stranger' who encounters the 'other' and must negotiate her space. By examining the Turkish-Syrian border and Syrian refugees' experiences in the border city of Antakya, this article offers a critical lens to view the identity and politics of the researcher and embodied geopolitics.

Key-words: Reflexivity, Hatay, Syrian border, Ethnography, Displacement

In November 2020, while I was conducting my fieldwork on Syrian women's healing processes in Hatay, the southernmost border of Turkey with Syria, I was invited to a book club organized for women by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) – an international non-governmental organization operating in Turkey – to participate in the reading and discussion of a book with Syrian refugee women. The book chosen was *On Identity* by Amin Maalouf. There were eight women in the room along with an interpreter from the DRC and only three of them were Turkish speakers from Hatay, including myself. The goal of the organization was to encourage dialogue and to build bridges between Turkish women from Hatay and the Syrian women, as part of the local integration project by the DRC. Although the DRC organizers were disappointed by the number of participants, particularly on the Turkish side, they were glad that they were able to host such an event in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. I was invited to contribute to the event not

only as a researcher but also as a local woman from Hatay (Antioch in English) and expected to be a facilitator in the conversation.

The women in the workshop were intrigued by the opening presentation by a DRC consultant from Syria, the moderator of the meeting, who had been living in Antakya for 8 years. Rama, the consultant, was eager to show intersectional and fluid aspects of identities by giving the examples of food and daily activities that different cultures such as Greek, Syrian and Turkish have shared for decades. She clearly thought it would be an effective introduction to Maalouf's book but what she did not expect was the contestation of some women insisting on finding out the 'origins' of the Mousakka presented by Rama. The discussion over whom the food belonged to was an ironic representation of the rigid boundaries that 'identities' manifest in Antakya as opposed to what Maalouf argued in his book. The tense debate in the book club continued to revolve around the issue of 'who belonged where?' and how to define 'identities' of the Syrian children or teenagers, who recognize Turkey as their only home. Najla, a 45 year old woman from Hama, and a founding member of a local non-governmental organization called *Ablam* (my sister), asked to speak. After she talked about how she accepted Hatay as her home and multiple identities as a refugee she reproached about forms of racism she encountered. Then she looked at me and asked directly to me: 'Why do you think people don't want us here? You are from here! Tell us, what should we do to have people from here like and accept us?' I was startled so much that I did not know how to respond. I felt upset and mulled the question over in my head trying to figure out why it bothered me. Perhaps it was because I was not aware of how 'insider' my position was to my Syrian interlocutors, as I did not see myself as either an outsider or insider. It was the first time that I was so bluntly asked to give advice *as an insider, rather than a researcher,* on how to build rapport with the locals. I was 'placed' as a local and therefore expected to know the answer, and Najla was willing to listen. I kept her question in mind throughout my time in the field, which made me wonder about the anthropologist's role as an intermediary. However, the question Najla put forth implied more than a simple desire to bond with the local women. First, it refers to the efforts of the Syrian women to understand the reasons why they have been discriminated against, and the possibility of overcoming 'identities' as Maalouf suggested. Second, it situates Syrian women as the primary agents to be 'liked' and suggests that *they* needed to act. In response to her question, I tried to address the significance of mutual care and effort. I was not sure what it meant to others in the room but Najla was certainly grateful to hear it from me *as a local.*

As Donnan and Wilson (1999, 64) suggest "experiences of borders simultaneously reinforce and disintegrate social and political status and role, and structure and meaning, by putting into sharp relief the full range of our identities." This was especially true for the women attending the book club since we were all negotiating 'living together' in this border city with all aspects of differentiation as refugees, women, citizens, locals. In terms of ethnographers, borders as liminal zones do not only contest identities and belonging but also push the limits of ethnography to go beyond participant observation and interviews.

As a border ethnographer with multiple subject positionalities, I needed to be aware of the different sentiments of ethno-religious groups I had worked with in Hatay. My position as an Arab-

Alawite woman, a native anthropologist and a scholar with a history of long-term engagement with the field site pushed me to conduct a more 'reflexive anthropology' and negotiate my positionality with my interlocutors (Can 2019). First, reflexive anthropology stems from a long-standing exchange of knowledge between states, social sciences, activists, and the authors' involvement in the situations about which they write (Greenhouse 2002, 7). Second, reflexivity is an integral part of how the researcher inserts herself within the web of power relations and how that affects methods, interpretations, knowledge production (Kobayashi 2003) and interaction(s) with local people and cultures she encounters while in the field.

This essay addresses reflexive dimensions and challenges of multiple subjectivities and researcher's boundaries in the field while working at the border. As presented in the ethnographic vignette above, I demonstrate the ways in which I have negotiated my own position and experienced certain ethical dilemmas as a native anthropologist during my fieldwork at the Turkey-Syria border since 2015. In this sense, drawing on my fieldwork at different times in the last decade, this essay describes challenges working in a border area contested by a war next door and looks for the ways to conduct politically engaged fieldwork and migrant advocacy. The discussion that follows is three-fold. First, I focus on Syrian displacement and the politics of the Syrian civil war as they are manifested in Hatay. Second, I show the complexity and ambiguities of identity positions in Turkish borderlands that often intersect with ethnographic place and vulnerability of the researcher. Third, I examine the possibilities of politically engaged position as a woman researcher while doing fieldwork that brings attention to migrant advocacy, care and gender.

Syrian Displacement and Gender in Hatay

The Syrian uprising erupted in 2011, after the Syrian people took to the streets protesting the Syrian regime and the regime's brutal response turned it into a civil war. It displaced millions of Syrians both externally and internally and most of the Syrians who fled from violence found refuge in border areas of Turkey and Lebanon. Although the majority of the Syrians in the Turkish borderlands expected to return to their homes once the war ended, the conflict continued for more than a decade and rendered return impossible. Moreover, the physical security concerns and infrastructural problems in Syria still hinder any returns. Today, there are approximately four-million Syrians living in Turkey, more than half of whom reside in the southern border cities.[2] My field site, Hatay, has more than 400,000 Syrians out of a total city population of 1.6 million. The city of Hatay has a unique geopolitical and cultural significance due to its historical and demographic landscape. Hatay was under French rule for nine months and annexed from French-mandated Syria in 1939. The city today displays the disarray of post-colonial spaces: a border place that is almost impossible to define without the context of the Syrian civil war. It is a city which, on one hand, is urbanized with modern constructions, plazas and shopping malls. On the other hand, it is rural in many aspects, such as in its lack of various industries and failing infrastructure development. Yet Hatay is renowned for its multiculturalism and its ethnic diversity,

as may be seen in its diverse communities of Sunni-Turks, Armenians, Greek Orthodox Christians, and the largest proportion of Arab citizens of Turkey, one-third of whom are descendants of the Arab Alawites in Syria (Can 2017, 175). The Syrian civil war and the Syrian migration have impacted Hatay most because of the Syrian president Bashar Assad's Alawite identity and the demographic and political landscape of Hatay. Furthermore, the Turkish state's border policies, its support for the opposition in Syria (Dursunoğlu and Eren 2014), and its deteriorated relations with Syria have exacerbated tensions in Hatay. All these factors, along with the composition of different ethno-religious communities in the city, have made the city a difficult ethnographic field to navigate, and can make ethnographic fieldwork more "sensitive" in terms of the researcher's identity position.

Since 2011, the Turkey-Syria border has become both a "flexible" agent and a securitized, walled one for the Syrian refugees. After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the Turkish state accepted hundreds of thousands of Syrians as "guests", who were soon understood to be permanent migrants. The prolonged war created anxiety among Syrians since their anticipation to return to Syria has faded away. Turkey's role in Syria's crisis and the politics of the border added more complications to the Syrian refugees' relations with the locals in border cities. In portraying itself as the normative power in the Middle East (Oktav and Celikaksoy 2015, 412) and the representative of political Islam, Turkey opened its borders to Syrian asylum seekers in 2011. In this period, Turkey provided humanitarian support in the refugee camps and did not have long-term integration policies. The open border policy continued after 2014 and Turkey closed its southern border in 2015. The year of 2015 witnessed a humanitarian tragedy in which thousands of refugees used the dangerous route to European countries and lost their lives and/or were intercepted in the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea. Being stuck under "temporary protection" status, many Syrians in Turkey sought a better life aiming to settle in Europe. After the EU-Turkey statement in 2016[3], it became obvious that Syrians in Turkey have become permanent residents despite their lack of full refugee rights due to Turkey's geographical limitation established by the 1967 Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention (İçduygu 2015, 5). Today, Syrians in Turkey still face insecure legal status, limited rights and employment, and restricted mobility (Can 2017; Carpi and Şenoğuz 2019; Dağtaş 2018; Ilcan 2021)

The hardships that Syrian refugees experience on a daily basis in Hatay present different gendered forms of precarity. During my fieldwork, I observed that a Syrian in Antakya had to negotiate social and sectarian boundaries by confronting the ways the lack of legal protection, as well as systematic indifference and disdain toward Syrians, render them cheap labor and gendered Islamist "others." Syrian men are often judged in two ways: first they are stigmatized as "lazy" and unpatriotic men who did not stay to "fight" for their country. This sentiment was not peculiar to Antakya but during my interviews, I frequently heard statements such as "why don't they fight for their country? Instead of defending their own country, they are here enjoying their time." Questions such as these pushed me into the dilemma as to whether I should have challenged their statements, and in so doing perhaps irritate my interlocutors and lose my contacts. Such discriminatory practices increased in number as economic conditions worsened in Turkey after

2016. For instance, as I expanded my field research to other parts of the border in 2021, in different municipalities like Reyhanli, Kirikhan and cities like Adana, I observed local populations, especially Turkish men, blaming Syrian refugees for their unemployment and declining income. Hence, increasing unemployment and authoritarianism in Turkey, which cause "minoritized" communities to be even more oppressed, further amplified racism towards Syrians and anti-migrant sentiments.

Racism has been a major issue, raised more by Syrian women than by Syrian men in border cities (Özden and Ramadan 2019, 7), who could not afford to speak Arabic, their native language, in public, without having to deal with resentful looks and oppressive reactions. Syrian women have been exposed to comments on their religiosity, clothing style, and make-up, which I witnessed a few times when I met my interlocutors in a café or public place. Furthermore, their life in displacement is characterized by economic insecurity, precarious civil status, limited employment opportunities despite the desire to work, challenges in accessing aid, and increasing levels of gender-based violence. However, my goal in the field was to go beyond the stereotypes and victimizing image about Syrian women in Hatay. Despite the lack of protection and their precarious legal status, Syrian women I worked with were committed to initiate dialogue with the locals and find ways to establish relations with other – both Syrian and Turkish – women, as became obvious to me in the DRC meeting mentioned above. Although eager to become familiar residents of the city, Syrian women were usually isolated and lacked a common space for socialization (Özden and Ramadan 2019, 8). They most lamented how they had social routines and relative freedom in Syria, which was simply unfeasible for them in their new neighborhoods. Professional women who had a stable job in Syria could not find a job in Hatay and felt confined in their house with no income. As a result, they often felt like they did not belong in the city, and as Najla made it clear at the beginning of this article what they wanted was to be accepted and treated equally. As a native anthropologist creating safe space for refugee women, asserting agency, collaboration and solidarity were as important to me as was the production of anthropological knowledge.

Doing Fieldwork at/with the Border

In 2012, the porosity of the Turkish-Syrian border increased security concerns for the locals but particularly for the Alawite community in Hatay. The perceived threats were due to multiple sources of news that emphasized the existence of 'militants' in Hatay downtown. The proliferation of international NGOs and the influx of foreign correspondents to watch the Syrian events closely transformed the city into estranged space of encounters. In the summer of 2014, Turkey closed its borders and began pushing back Syrians who escaped from Russian bombardment.[4] They were trapped at the border and tried to survive through broiling-hot weather under the trees for days until the international community intervened, which pressured Turkey to open the border temporarily. These arbitrary border policies sparked a debate over the Turkish government's

ability to govern forced migration and border cities. More importantly, the failure in governance fueled anti-Syrian attitude and discrimination and mobilized fewer people to be involved in humanitarian work at the local level. The vulnerable and precarious situation for Syrian refugees was intensified with the EU-Turkey statement, and my Syrian interlocutors were disappointed and furious as they became a matter of a 'bargain' for states which show no intention of alleviating suffering. This was most visible in March 2020 when Turkey relaxed its borders because it had not received enough support in hosting the refugees from European countries. Thousands of Afghan and Syrian refugees began arriving at Turkey's borders with Greece and Bulgaria after the Turkish government suddenly indicated it would no longer block their passage to Europe.[5]

In such cases of structural violence and humanitarian tragedy, ethnographic research at the border goes beyond understanding policies and crossings, and it transforms into a human rights issue which prioritizes refugees as central agents of their movements and encounters. Doing fieldwork at the border shifts an anthropologist's role and conventional methods of research, and pushes ethical boundaries (for instance, see De Leon 2015). In this sense, anthropologists working in contested areas have addressed the difficulties of conducting fieldwork and their own position in relation to 'vulnerable' groups (Bornstein 2002; Cabot 2016; Mullings 1999; Hage 2009). However, "researcher vulnerability" (Bashir 2020, 667) is less analyzed in relation to multiplicity of positions and feeling of "helplessness" in the field. In some cases, I noticed individual advocacy for my interlocutors was strictly limited and it reflected my own vulnerability rather than that of the refugees. Researcher vulnerability refers to the researcher's exposure to physical and emotional danger (Behar 1996). It also includes the unpredictability of the participants, nuanced power relations and the dynamics of the research location such as a refugee shelter or camp. The negotiation of my ethno-religious identity, the disadvantages of being a member of an underprivileged community – Arab Alawites – and a privileged position of being a Turkish citizen who has been working as an academic complicated my relationship both with the refugees and the city residents.

Border research encompasses all these aspects of vulnerability along with the hardships of formal encounters with border officials and restrictions by state agents. An example of this vulnerability is the fear that I shared with my family and my interlocutors. In 2011, I followed the reactions of family and was worried about their safety in Hatay. The Turkish government's approach to the Syrian civil war infuriated ethno-religious groups in the city. After the Syrian crisis turned into a full-fledged war, fieldwork in Hatay became more challenging given the history of the city, and the threat of bombings and 'jihadist' violence, its conflicted ideological positions and increasing tensions. The arrival of Syrians changed the demographic landscape. The Syrian refugees were mostly Sunni and from urban centers like Aleppo, or from rural, pious and poor areas like Idlib, all of which concerned Alawites due to their long history of marginalization in the region. Alawites saw Syria under the rule of the Assads as the only state that partially fulfilled the longing for a safe Alawite haven, until the Syrian war began. The stress felt by the borderlanders revealed the level of danger as a result of the spillover of the war in Syria and the news about armed 'jihadists' entering Turkey and staying in Hatay.[6] In a context where the residents felt safe

and mobile, everyday life in Hatay became a space of anxiety and contestation after the Syrian crisis and arrival of the refugees (Can 2019, 7). It was in this context that I began my first three-month long fieldwork in 2012, and research continued intermittently after that.

One of the key aspects of differentiation for Syrians and the locals was the politics of naming the events in Syria. For most of my interlocutors who were critical of the opposition in Syria, the conflict was the 'Syrian war'. It implied that there were multiple equal sides to this 'proxy' war which also involves global influence and actors such as Turkey, the US and Russia. For Syrian refugees and people who were critical of the Syrian regime, it was the 'Syrian revolution'. Therefore, they emphasized the oppression in Syria and their demands such as basic human rights for their country (Pearlman 2017). Voicing their own stories, some of the Syrian refugees insisted that Syrian people's demonstrations and taking to the streets was revolutionary regardless of the outcome. As for the people who tried to be impartial and academic about the conflict, the phrase used was the 'Syrian civil war'. When I noticed this pattern, I felt conflicted once again. Syrian refugees, regardless of their 'side', believed and stated how they were ready to run the risk of losing everything for freedom and change in Syria. The question of where I stood in this crisis was always a matter of curiosity among my interlocutors. However, as an ethnographer one of the most challenging issues for me was to obtain reliable information amid competing truths and contradicting news. Moreover, there was little room and toleration for a real debate on Syria. For instance, when I interviewed Alawite men who were adamant about defining the uprising as 'jihadist', it was difficult to engage in a fruitful conversation. In the interviews with the supporters of rebels in Syria, the torture techniques and strategies of Assad were a recurring and dominant theme, which would prevent us from assessing the situation in a productive way. In both cases I was reluctant to state a strict side and that is when I realized "what to reveal and what not to reveal becomes a constant negotiation for the researcher in the field" (Zaman 2008).

Taking sides was a major dilemma for me when the Syrian migration and the Syrian war were mentioned in Hatay. In this sense, my ethno-religious identity played a more complicated role than I imagined. Being an Arab-Alawite woman and an activist working towards equal rights for all communities and migrants in Turkey, I was conflicted about how to manage 'sides' that consider each other 'enemies'. I was immediately called out by the city residents whenever I was vocal about refugee rights and blamed for supporting 'jihadists'. Ironically, I was also stigmatized as a 'sympathizer' of a brutal regime when I criticized certain aspects of the opposition in Syria. This situation required me to recognize the subjectivities and positionalities underlying many supposedly objective interviews and acknowledge how my identity could be both a challenge and a facilitator in the field. In most cases, my Syrian female interlocutors were comfortable talking to me and did not care about my sect or ethnicity. Syrian men were more reserved at first since they approached me more hesitantly about my interpretation of the conflict in Syria in terms of questioning if I define it as a 'revolution' or not.

Even though I was up front about the problem I had with taking sides and often stated that clear-cut declarations were not feasible, the negotiation itself indicated the dilemma of "researcher's place" in navigating the field, which coincides with insider-outsider position (Berger

2013). As Azmeary Ferdoush, working on the Bangladesh-India border, puts it: "being from the same region with a similar ethnic and racial background does not make the researcher an 'insider'. Rather, it blurs their positionality between an 'insider' and an 'outsider' " (Ferdoush 2020, 4). In a similar vein, in his reflexive piece on "political emotions" in the field, Ghassan Hage (2009) defines the researcher's position as "ethnographic vacillation", which is not just a movement between various states of being but a state of being in itself. This is an ethnography-specific negotiation, which is infused with its own specific feelings, hardships and confrontations (2009, 77). That is why it captures the state of being that is produced by the ethnographic navigation between the analytical and the participatory so well.

The 'place' of the researcher and all embodied politics of fieldwork are inherent to ethnographic work in border regions. The border was always present in my life long before I took an interest in being a border scholar. I was raised to be very conscious of 'we'ness (Simpson 2014, 17) within the community and multiple loyalties across the border. In the case of a crisis between the two countries – Turkey and Syria – the border was often closed and bureaucracy would become more challenging, but nostalgia for the 'homeland' always remained. Growing up with multiple contested belongings, such as being raised as an Arab in Turkish society and Alawite in a Sunni-dominated country, made ambiguity permanent in my life. However, Hatay as a border city was as intimate to me as it was strange and distant, especially after the Syrian conflict. While investigating the production of difference and encounters between citizen residents and Syrian refugees, I was also a subject of the research itself as I was a part of these negotiations.

My relatedness to the city – no matter how advantageous it might seem – and to locals in the field was admittedly a challenging one. Even as a native anthropologist, I was questioned many times about my affiliation to the US, my marital status and my "Turkishness." (Can 2019, 21). The ways the native ethnographer engages with everyday life in Hatay includes those outside and inside her "familiar" community and thus requires a constant effort to build trust and balance advocacy. My positionality and my research methodology went beyond a naive self-reflexivity to define my subjectivity: my constant negotiation of facts, legality, solidarity, and the expectations (like advocacy, encounters with state agents, etc.) that my interlocutors had were all part of the research. While doing fieldwork, I was oscillating between "personal self" and "ethnographic self" (Coffey 1999; Manos 2005) and struggling to navigate in-between. The border's liminality represented my own liminal space in the field. This liminal space of negotiation became confrontational at times due to the political polarization in Syria and identity politics in Turkish borderlands.

Care, Boundaries and Advocacy in the Field

My ethno-religious identity mattered more to my interlocutors when they were able to identify the reason for my research. It was not about solidarity or enmity for Syrians, but rather they were seeking an answer to the question "why do you care?" This realization helped me negotiate my positionality not only as a researcher but as a migrant rights advocate. Telling refugee stories,

voicing their concerns and/or interviewing them were my 'goals'. Their goal was to find a way to be part of the 'city': to be internalized as the city's residents, to be accepted in compassionate relations, and, perhaps most importantly, to meet people who care and are in solidarity with them.

Conducting politically engaged ethnography means more than participant observation and in-depth interviews for me. Location of the research, 'situated' knowledge (Haraway 1988) and the level of care complicate personal responsibilities and boundaries of the ethnographer. During my fieldwork I worked with a wide range of non-governmental organizations. I was affiliated with a local research institute, but I volunteered in some NGOs and worked as a consultant for short periods at different international NGOs. The NGOs operating in the border cities focused more on designing projects that interest their donors rather than collaborating with the locals. Although the humanitarian aid was accessible through international NGOs, their engagements aiming 'cultural integration' were often unsustainable, similar to what Ulf Hannerz called "culture shock prevention industry" (Hannerz 1998, 110). My involvement in these organizations facilitated access to my interlocutors but also influenced my fieldwork experience radically. Oscillating between the researcher position and the activist position, I found myself questioning ethical boundaries. One case was especially intriguing during my fieldwork in the summer of 2015.

The summer of 2015 was a spectacle of violence at the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea borders of Turkey. Refugees from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and East Africa sought dangerous routes – known as the Balkan route – to arrive in Italy or Greece by sea. The number of deaths at sea rose to record levels in April 2015, and then dropped dramatically in May and June. Between January and March, 479 refugees and migrants drowned or went missing, as opposed to 15 during the first three months of the year before. In April, the situation took an even more terrible turn. In several concurrent wrecks, an unprecedented 1,308 refugees and migrants drowned or went missing in a single month (compared to 42 in April 2014).[7] I began my long-term fieldwork in Hatay in May 2015 and got in touch with the Syrian groups whom I had been working with for a year. I met with one of my interlocutors, Fares (25) who worked as a daily laborer and made little money. Fares was not happy in Hatay and I was aware of it, but at the time that we met he told me that he had no hope about things getting better for Syrians in Turkey. He was upset and quite distressed because he had multiple racist encounters and did not have a permanent job although he arrived at Hatay in 2013. As we were chatting about migrants' situation in general, he mentioned people trying to make it to Europe and the Balkan route. I thought it was just a simple conversation about gruesome journeys. A couple of weeks later, Fares called me and we met again. He wanted my support and some ideas about crossing the Mediterranean. He told me that he was determined about leaving and that he already had established some contacts. I was a bit shocked and my first instinct was to stop him. We had a long conversation about how dangerous it would be and that he would find a job in Turkey eventually. "Can you find me a job?" he asked. I paused for a second and he immediately continued without waiting for my answer. "You see, it is very difficult, even you are not sure about it", he added.

He was right about my powerlessness and about deteriorating conditions in Hatay. What was the ethical and 'right kind of' approach that I needed to follow at that moment? Was I supposed to

stop him from going or should I have done more to find him a job? If I had not prevented him from going would that have been irresponsible? Did I have such power to influence his decision after all? I felt guilty about his decision to leave. I could not help but think that as an 'insider', I was the 'host' and that I failed to entertain his wishes. I felt resentful simultaneously because I was not sure about what to do with the information Fares put out there for me to dwell on. Fares left at the end of May and I did not hear from him for a month, which made me think of the worst scenarios. He sent a message to me in July stating that he had arrived at Germany safely. I was relieved but I cannot stop thinking about what could have happened had he not made it. My ethnographic encounter with Fares fueled me to be more decisive about my alignment with refugees and migrants and to speak out on human rights violations, deportations and racism. Self-reflexive research is not enough at the border to stand up against violence.

In my field experience, what migrants needed was not only understanding their plight but vocalizing their rights and addressing their needs. Working with them meant being aware of and engaged in the entanglement of right-based advocacy with everyday struggle. This entanglement adds more complexity to an already complex positionality. However, doing research at the border involves a constant negotiation of boundaries between the interlocutors and the researcher, but more importantly it pushes the limits of ethnography and blurs boundaries between the anthropologist and the advocate positions. As Hage points out, "partly because of the individualistic dimension of emotions, emotion-centered participant observation produces within the anthropologist a set of emotions that is specific to ethnography" (2009, 76). It was a challenging lesson, but I partly learnt how to navigate through those political emotions (Lutz and White 1986), and I embraced the fact that both my insider and outsider positions would be ephemeral once I locate myself as part of the struggle against injustice.

Concluding Remarks

Ethnographers need to be conscious of how research and its written result have potential repercussions for various communities, which in my case includes both borderlanders and the Syrian refugees. Above and in other publications I have written about what Syrian refugees have been exposed to since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, and too about what we – engaged anthropologists – can do in research situations such as this. At the least, ethnographers should query their own subject position by paying attention to power relations in their own roles in the production of knowledge. Ethnographic fieldwork at the border areas often signifies chaotic circumstances and entangled subjectivities. In this essay, I have demonstrated the challenges faced during my ethnographic fieldwork along the border of Turkey and Syria both due to political sensibilities embedded in the politics of the Syrian civil war and the complexity of my positionality. I also situated myself within and through the research to demonstrate how the researcher might have been vulnerable, along with interlocutors, both in the field and in managing different strands of research in a war zone. As Hannerz puts it, anthropologists are likely to become

ethically concerned about taking their knowledge to the outside, in ways which may harm the people we write about, making them individually or collectively vulnerable (Hannerz 1998, 111).

While the anxiety over physical and cultural survival increases in Hatay, the 'side' each community takes becomes more and more salient. What becomes apparent in the process of intensified cultural and political boundaries is the significance of the researcher's 'useful' engagement that aims for challenging those rigid boundaries. Such an approach stimulates the creation of dialogue between seemingly incompatible parties. The book club meeting described at the beginning of this article might seem to be a simple event with no significant impact. Nevertheless, its very existence signals willingness to work for durable solutions and mediate differences in order to achieve intimacy and compassionate relations. In the field, I was both an insider and an outsider, but my role as an intermediary was the one that mattered most and contributed to the reality of the field.

Analyzing negotiations and positionality of the researcher at the border expose futile attempts at creating uncomplicated and 'objective' scholar identities that are often at once assumed to be possible. For border communities and Syrian refugees, the Syrian civil war and the lack of protection and peace in the border region reveal the need of solidarity and advocacy. In bolstering engaged ethnography, the border research pushes the limits of the researcher and has made the ethnographic work a multi-faceted process in everyday relations and shared practices. Finally, I believe that it is our duty as border researchers to encourage solidarity platforms and to acknowledge with whom we are aligned in order to fight discrimination and racism in every scholarly research.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank the journal editors and anonymous referees for their invaluable comments and feedback on the article. Thanks to my mentor Thomas M. Wilson, for his support and guidance in the field. I also thank all my interlocutors in Hatay for their participation. All interlocutor names are pseudonyms for the purpose of confidentiality.

[2] The most Syrian-populated border cities are Hatay, Gaziantep and Sanliurfa. The number of Syrians in Antakya is currently 433,429.

[3] The EU-Turkey deal suggests that Turkey is a safe third country, which means it is eligible to be a country of destination for the settlement of asylum seekers. The argument that Turkey is an eligible destination country sets up the corresponding argument for the necessity to manage this field effectively. This endeavor then is made more difficult within the limits of the existing legislation governing entry, stay and deportation of foreigners.

[4] For the news on closed borders please see HRW report: www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/23/turkey-syrians-pushed-back-border [accessed on 5/17/2021].

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[5] See: www.reliefweb.int/report/turkey/stl-situation-report-v2-edirne-pazarkule-border-turkey-5th-march-2020 [accessed 5/19/2021].

[6] For further information please see Turkish news on entrance of jihadi fighters. tr.sputniknews.com/analiz/201607201023976198-fransa-turkiye-suriye-isid/ [accessed 4/19/2021].

[7] www.unhcr.org/news/press/2015/7/5592b9b36/mediterranean-crisis-2015-six-months-refugee-migrant-numbers-highest-record.html [accessed 3/20/2021].

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