

Bordering isolation

43(2): 62/66 | DOI: 10.1177/0306422014536301

Kate Maltby reports on the Doms, nomads who have been forced by the Syrian war into Turkey and “pass” as Kurds to get better treatment

BEFORE THE SYRIAN civil war, 60-year-old Shaima was used to slipping over Turkey’s porous eastern border twice a year. “They hated us here, but in the summer there was always work. The men helped with the harvest, and there were weddings for the girls to dance. And at the wedding parties, they’d pay our men for music, then you-know-what with our women. Every winter, we would go back to Aleppo, to the big family.” Did she ever have a passport to ease her transit? “Of course not! Haven’t the Turks told you, we are gypsies?”

Shaima is a Syrian Dom, a member of a marginal group whose nomadic existence has left her people barely documented and all but invisible in their place of refuge. Today Shaima lives in a refugee camp near Gaziantep, Turkey’s sixth-largest city. She is among the 2.5 million people who have fled Syria as civil war ravages the country. As of March 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had documented the arrival of nearly 650,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey. Activist Kemal Vural Tarlan, a photographer who has documented the Dom for the last decade, argues that the true number is nearly double that, and should include hundreds of thousands of unregistered refugees who have illicitly crept or bribed their way across the border and now work in the black economy. The Syrian Dom are among the least likely Syrians to have ID papers,

and all people arriving at the border without papers spend months in spontaneously established border camps, shanty towns in the no-man’s land between the spot where Syria ends and Turkey begins, denied entry. Tens of thousands of Syrians are reported to have died of starvation here, just out of reach of refuge.

Since the emergence of jihadist guerilla opposition to the Syrian regime, most importantly ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, access to much of the border is controlled by Islamist fighters. So the unofficial shanty camps stretching for miles just inside the Turkish border are places of starvation and suspicion. “To bring aid to the starving,” claims Vural Tarlan, “you have to be permitted by the jihadis.” Shiraz Maher, senior research fellow at King’s College London’s International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, has similar tales from the region: “No one can get aid inside the border without the agreement of the IHH.” Wildly popular in Turkey, the IHH is an Islamist-leaning organisation that collects funds seemingly for humanitarian aid: it is frequently accused of siphoning its funds to Islamist fighters. In the West, the IHH is mainly known for its role in the 2010 “flotilla raid” to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza strip. To its defenders, the IHH is merely an Islamic version of Christian Aid; to its detractors, it is a front for terrorism. What is clear is that the



ABOVE: Nomadic Dom musicians in the Amuq plain, close to the Turkish city of Antakya

Syrian Dom are undesirable to Islamists. In regions where access to aid is dependent on perceived piety, the Dom, with their reputation for Alevi theism and promiscuity, rarely make the cut.

Those who do get to eastern Turkey find that ethnic rivalries have preceded them. Broadly speaking, the Turkish population has been welcoming to their Syrian guests: the Turkish government has spent \$2 billion on refugee support, and for all the country's political divisions, the cost to the Turkish taxpayer has been accepted with barely a murmur from the opposition. But this gen-

erosity rarely extends to those refugees who swell the numbers of ethnic minorities that Turkey already finds inconvenient. And as the total number of refugees in the country approaches one million, the reluctance in some quarters to integrate Syrians culturally in Turkey is creating a demographic time-bomb.

At present, Turkish officials and Syrian refugee leaders alike choose to murmur about a swift end to the Syrian war and a return home for refugees, ducking questions about how far Syrians should put down roots in Turkey. The ruling AK Party →

→ proudly boasts that it will pay for any Syrian who meets the entry requirements to attend a Turkish university – but in reality a mere thousand state scholarships have been awarded, because few of the hundreds of thousands young Syrians in the country meet the required proficiency in Turkish.

This is not a hurdle the Turkish government is keen to remove. The question of whether Syrian children should learn Turkish has become a political battle. In a nation which for years denied Kurdish children education in their own tongue, the ministry of education now insists that children in Syrian refugee camps should learn in their own language – and only their own language. In the Gaziantep region’s generously funded

At this fault line between two hard-pressed minorities much of the worst violence experienced by the Dom has erupted

network of showpiece refugee camps, the ministry provides schoolbooks based on the Turkish curriculum, but only in Syrian Arabic. Aid agencies talk, off the record, of serious difficulties in encouraging camp governors to provide lessons in Turkish, or even English. Fatima, a Circassian refugee in the flagship Nizip II camp in Gaziantep, told me she had abandoned her post as a volunteer in the camp school in protest against the authorities’ refusal to provide even a basic introduction to Turkish for her children. “They told me, why do I need to learn Turkish, when I won’t be staying in Turkey? So I said, what is the point of teaching our children at all, if they will never have a life in this country?”

This is not to say Turkish citizenship is off the table for all Syrians: ahead of the April 2014 elections, reports emerged in Gaziantep

of incumbent officials handing out ID cards on condition that the recipients performed their first civic duty by obediently voting AKP.

Meanwhile, as Prime Minister Recep Tayyipi Erdogan continues to rally his supporters against those considered insufficiently Islamic, his main targets have been Turkey’s Alevi population, a group closely associated with Domari speakers. The Alevi religion combines music and dance: as Hussein, a young Alevi from Istanbul, tells me: “Almost every ritual is a dance – we worship the divine through music and with our bodies.”

Alevi religious practices have long fascinated the West, with their Sufi-influenced mysticism lionised as a liberal Islam. Nonetheless, most Alevi traditions quite clearly predate Islam, a fact that is not lost on their Islamist detractors. One of the most significant demonstrations against Erdogan last year, during the Gezi park protests, took place on 2 July, the 20th anniversary of an arson attack on an Alevi conference in which 33 leading intellectuals were killed at Sivas, Istanbul. Two months earlier, Erdogan had announced the name of the latest structure to bridge the Bosphorus: the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, named for Selim the Grim, notorious for massacring Alevis. As Anglo-Turkish author Alev Scott notes in her recent book, *Turkish Awakening*, Selim famously declared: “The killing of one Alevi has as much heavenly reward as the killing of 70 Christians.” On the anniversary of the Sivas massacre, for which no one has been convicted, it felt like a slap in the face.

By no means all of the 10-15 million Alevis in Turkey are Domari speakers, but a majority of Domari speakers are Alevis or, crucially, perceived to be so. In a transitory population, such distinctions between Alevi and Domari, Domari and Kurd, frequently blur. The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) claims that Turkey was already home to 500,000 Domari speakers before the Syrian influx, in a combined total of five

million Roma, Dom and Lom “gypsies”. But most assimilated Domari speakers go through phases of hiding their ethnic heritage, passing as Kurds when settling in new towns. And it is at this fault line between two hard-pressed minorities that much of the worst violence experienced by the Dom has erupted. In a notorious instance in 2006, two Dom teenagers working as shepherds were lynched in the city of Silvan, shortly before their employers, an impoverished Kurdish farming family, were due to pay them for seven months’ work. The local police repeatedly failed to investigate the deaths.

Syria’s Dom population is a marginal group whose nomadic existence has left them barely documented and all but invisible in their place of refuge. The question of whether the label “gypsy” should be used for the Dom is one on which ethnologists fiercely disagree – Shaima herself insists that her people have no ethnic relationship to the “criminal” Roma. But here in eastern Turkey, the locals are in no doubt. “Çingene”, a regional leader of the ruling AK Party, spits out when asked about provision for the Dom population. And then, reverting to English: “Gypsies. Why do you want to go near them? Anyway, there are none here. They go to dirty places, like Istanbul.”

The 2.2 million Dom have always lived on the margins of society. Most Middle East states disclaim the need to provide Domari language support in schools, or seasonal health clinics at Dom campsites. One of the few places to offer them some shelter was Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, at some cost to their reputation: a few years ago I met young Iraqis in Istanbul who spoke with nostalgia of Baghdad’s red-light Kamalia district, in which Dom women worked as dancers for Saddam’s top commanders – and allegedly as courtesans. Since the US invasion in 2003, religious sects have taken turns to purge Baghdad of the Doms’ seemingly unIslamic influence: Kamalia has been renamed Hay al-Zahra after the distinctly more virtuous



ABOVE: Two Dom children play as adults collect waste paper, card and scrap iron, in Antep, Turkey

daughter of the Prophet, and in 2005 Reuters and the Dom Research Center reported that the army of Muqtada al-Sadr had unleashed mortar rounds on a makeshift village of 250 Dom families near Diwaniya, killing one and forcing the encampment to disband. “Iraqi leaders of all sects repeat the same line about the Dom people: ‘They are alcohol-sellers and whores, so there is no place for them in an Islamic nation,’” says photographer Vural Tarlan. “They can no longer punish Saddam, so they have decided the Dom symbolise his decadence. This is their revenge.”

Now it is the turn of Syria’s Dom population to be cast adrift. Before the civil war, tens of thousands of Dom made their winter homes in Syria, mainly in Damascus and Aleppo. SIL International, the UNESCO-recognised body which researches endangered languages, claims 37,000 Domari speakers were left in the country in 2005, but linguist Dr Bruno Hérin, one of the world’s few experts on the Domari tongue, cautions against exact figures. Vural Tarlan suggests that the number under the radar may be far higher: “There is no official recognition whatsoever, in Syria, just as in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan or Palestine.” So most Syrian Dom have lived in hiding, passing as Kurds for official purposes. Hérin’s research suggests that up to 10,000 Domari speakers based themselves in Damascus before the war – alongside scratching a living as musicians, blacksmiths and tinkers, the Dom appear to have cornered the Syrian market in cut-price dentistry. →

→ And that's not all. The ERRC's 2008 report on violence against Roma and Dom populations identified a disturbing pattern of Dom women marrying into Kurdish families, only for their in-laws to respond with violence when they discovered that the new wife was merely "passing". Frequently Dom women are on the receiving end of violence from both their own and neighbouring communities. In a typical instance in 1997, a woman from the town of Van was discovered by her husband's Kurdish family to be of Dom origin – her in-laws expelled her, but her brother escorted her back to her husband's home to avert dishonour. Shortly after, she was found shot to death, almost certainly at the hands of her husband.

In the same town, locals tell the story of a young Dom woman convicted of the murder of her Kurdish husband. At her trial, neighbours testified that a functional marriage had suddenly turned sour when, after seven years, the husband had discovered his wife's Dom origin. He had responded with extreme physical abuse, marking her breasts with scissors and publicly harnessing her to carts.

But for all this doom and gloom, there are growing signs of Dom-Kurd integration throughout eastern Turkey. A century after the genocide, the old Armenian quarter in Gaziantep once again bustles with life. The Armenian quarter is long gone, but its narrow houses are home to an assortment of Kurds, Dom and Syrian refugees, living alongside each other. Together, they form the city's second economy: Gaziantep, one of the world's fastest growing cities, is hungry for cheap labour to support its booming agricultural industry. So when Turks come home to sleep, the refugees go out to cover the nightshift in farms and factories.

In a quiet alley in this quarter is Kemal Vural Tarlan's Kirkayak Arts Centre. It is the only place in Gaziantep you can watch an independent film – and the locus of a project to forge a new relationship between Kurds and the Dom travellers they have so long resented. Vural Tarlan is a Kurd. He

tries to give Dom refugees a voice through phototherapy: every weekend he holds workshops for the Dom community, teaching them to use a camera, and encouraging them to take photographs of their experiences throughout the week. "These people are travellers," he says. "They come to my workshops for two months, three months, then they move out of town. But when I print their photographs, I find they have left something permanent behind." He regularly holds exhibitions dedicated to Dom photography in universities throughout Turkey, visual campaigns to remind Turks of the forgotten communities living alongside them.

But Vural Tarlan doesn't just give the Dom people artistic representation. His arts centre is a hub for the Kurdish community in Gaziantep – and it is through him that Gaziantep's Kurds find themselves meeting the despised Dom people as equals, neighbours, even artistic partners. Vural Tarlan believes things are improving between the two groups, citing regional government efforts in neighbouring Diyarbakır to ensure hate crimes reported by the Dom are followed up by police. In a region under intense demographic pressure, racial tensions are not going away any time soon. But leaving Vural Tarlan's workshop, surrounded by self-portraits of smiling, confident Dom children, it is hard not to feel hopeful. ☒

Some names in this article have been changed

©Kate Maltby
www.indexonensorship.org

Kate Maltby has travelled widely in Turkey as a classical scholar. She writes on politics for the Daily Telegraph in the UK, and is completing a PhD at University College London. She tweets @katemaltby