



## Book Review

# The Precarious Lives of Syrians: Migration, Citizenship, and Temporary Protection in Turkey

Baban, F., Ilcan, S., & Rygiel, K. (2021). McGill-Queen's University Press. ISBN: 978-0228008033 (cloth) CAD\$130.00; ISBN 978-0228008040 (paper) CAD\$37.95; ISBN 978-0228008034 (e-book) CAD\$37.95. 384 pages.

TANYA BASOK  
University of Windsor, Canada

The book *The Precarious Lives of Syrians: Migration, Citizenship, and Temporary Protection in Turkey* came out in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic when travel restrictions made it all but impossible for people forced to abandon their homes for reasons such as wars, protracted conflicts, political or sexuality-based persecutions, or gender violence, to seek in other countries access to social justice, that is, safety, security, inclusion, and physical and mental well-being. Yet, COVID-19 merely exacerbated the exclusions that have become entrenched in the global governance of migration. Many states have adopted a multiplicity of techniques to prevent asylum seekers from reaching their borders. These measures include the increased surveillance of borders, seas, and national territories and the imposition of new visa restrictions, to name a few. For countries of destination, keeping refugees out has also meant making deals with the countries en route. It is these transit countries that are now responsible for detaining the migrant flows, deporting migrants, or as is the case of Turkey, providing protection, albeit temporary, to asylum seekers. However, as *The Precarious Lives of Syrians* clearly demonstrates, these temporary forms of protection leave displaced people insecure and vulnerable. This captivating book offers a poignant, scrupulous, and provocative analysis of what Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel call the “architecture of precarity” composed of three layers, namely, precarious status, precarious space, and precarious movement. It provides a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of the impact of this

Correspondence Address: Tanya Basok, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, University of Windsor, Windsor, ON, N9B 3P4; email: basok@uwindsor.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788



“architecture” on the lives of Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey, as well as the way these uprooted people confront exclusions.

The analysis of the ethnographic research presented in the book is framed with respect to three inter-connected areas of study: postwar humanitarian emergency responses, including temporary protection; the nexus between humanitarianism and precarity; and counter-responses to precarity. To begin with, the authors explain how the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement (commonly known as the EU-Turkey Deal) has made it possible for European Union countries to hedge their responsibility towards asylum seekers, as outlined in the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. In its turn, Turkey accepted the responsibility to host and extend humanitarian protection to forced migrants. This Statement is one reason why the movements of refugees attempting to seek protection in EU countries have become even more precarious recently than before the EU-Turkey Deal was reached.

As the authors elucidate, unlike many other asylum seekers in Turkey, Syrian refugees were granted “temporary protection,” a status that effectively deprives them of opportunities for third country resettlement. At the same time, for most Syrians in Turkey, temporary protection status is not a pathway to a more secure long-term legal status in Turkey either. In fact, as the authors document, the citizenship application process is informal, obscure, and arbitrary. Syrians are legally precarious in Turkey in yet another way. The application process for an identity document to which Syrians are entitled in Turkey, known as *kimlik*, is confusing to many. Furthermore, while *kimlik* restricts their rights to domestic mobility, without it or with a *kimlik* granted in a city different from their place of residence, Syrians face the risk of deportation to Syria.

The temporary protection status grants certain rights to displaced people from Syria. Yet, as the authors reveal, their access to health care, housing, education, and secure employment is severely restricted by lack of adequate information on how to access services, language barriers, prejudice and discrimination by Turkish service providers, prohibitive costs (particularly in the case of medication or some medical procedures), and uncertain legal status. The authors refer to these exclusions as precarious space, and they illustrate that this form of precarity is particularly severe for women and LGBTQ people. Yet, measures taken by charitable organizations, local district administrators or the Turkish government to increase access to health care, housing or education reinforce the uneven and arbitrary distribution of social support among Syrian refugees in precarious spaces. As we learn from the book, status precarity also forces Syrians to accept informal jobs that lack security or job protection, and it is not uncommon for employers in agriculture, garbage and textiles to employ child labour.

The precarious legal status, precarious movements, and precarious spaces deprive Syrian migrants residing in Turkey of dignity, health, and well-being, and preclude most of them from seeking social justice elsewhere. Yet, as the book informs readers, Syrians in Turkey resist their precarity through

activities of daily life and cultural engagements to force a sense of belonging and demand recognition as subjects with rights. Despite rampant xenophobia, many Syrians in Turkey claim spaces in Turkish cities when they organize centres for community support, build ties with locals, engage in artistic productions, set up centres for learning about their rights, particularly women's rights, receive schooling, exchange information, and organize social and cultural events. Moreover, despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, some Syrians exercise their right to escape from precarity in Turkey by undertaking perilous and difficult journeys towards some EU countries or by seeking acceptance by such countries as Canada. The three stories presented in Chapter 6 attest to migrants' determination, ingenuity, and resilience.

In sum, in *The Precarious Lives of Syrians*, Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel offer a sophisticated analysis of the architecture of precarity for migrants forced to escape from Syria and reside in Turkey that is built on three inter-connected pillars, namely, status precarity, space precarity, and movement precarity. It elucidates complex ways in which this architecture of precarity shapes the lives of Syrian migrants who, despite all adversity, continue to demand their rights to social justice by forging belonging, solidarity, support, recognition, mobility, and the right to dignified lives.

As someone who teaches courses in migration and refugee studies at the graduate and undergraduate level, I am convinced that this book would be of tremendous value to my students. By covering a diversity of topics and concepts, such as the birth of the refugee protection regime and its limitations, humanitarianism and governance, bordering practices, "liminal legality," social protections for refugees, human rights violations, agency, resistance, and citizenship, this book will help students to relate abstract conceptual issues to specific government policies and initiatives and refugees' daily experiences. As someone who conducts research on migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico, the externalization of the U.S. border controls into the territory of its southern neighbours, the precarity of legal statuses granted to asylum seekers in Mexico, and the precarity of their journey through Mexico towards the U.S. border, I was inspired by the analytical framework elaborated in this book that links precarity at three different levels and elucidates the connection between them and the rich ethnographic research. This book is a great read and I highly recommend it for researchers, policy analysts and policy makers, and students.