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Rescaling hospitality

Everyday displacement at the Syrian-Turkish border

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Abstract
As demonstrated in an ethnographic description of displaced Syrians living in Gaziantep, Turkey, hospitality fails when it is captured by a state that transforms ethical-religious duties into legal obligations. Indeed, Syrian “guests” cannot reciprocate state hospitality because they do not belong to the same scale; moreover, they refuse their guest status, claiming to be refugees and thus subjects of law rather than favor. This scalar confusion also puts Turkish locals in a delicate position, since hospitality’s very purpose is defeated by the rescaling of duty-based hospitality and the state’s injunction that locals play host to displaced Syrians. The rescaling of hospitality and the confusion of its moral, religious, and legal registers thus alienate local hosts and guests, creating hostility, as hosts and guests characterize each other as “bad.” Eventually, hospitality’s dead ends lead Syrians to aspire to become refugees, to imagine new migratory horizons, and to follow novel routes to living with dignity.

KEYWORDS
dignity, guests, hospitality, scales, Syria, Syrian refugees, Turkey, Turkish border

“We are treated nothing like guests, and you know that very well!” said Umm Nidal as I sat in her poorly furbished apartment in the border city of Gaziantep, Turkey.1 Like millions of other Syrians, she had fled the country, escaping the regime’s ferocious repression of its revolting population and the warfare it had unleashed. She found refuge in Turkey, which initially maintained an open-door policy, defining displaced Syrians as its “guests.” But in 2015, Syrians’ movement within the country was restricted. As Umm Nidal put it, “We are guests, but now even with a kimlik”—meaning an identification document issued specifically to Syrians—“we cannot travel to another city without authorization from the wali [a local administrative authority].”

The restriction on Syrians’ internal movement became permanent in 2016, when Turkey signed a cooperation agreement with the EU, widely known as the “EU-Turkey deal,” that led to a crackdown on refugees’ movement. The deal aimed to prevent Syrians from entering Greece and the EU, and it allowed the EU to deport Syrians from Greece to Turkey. As these political developments took place, Syrians in Turkey became ever-more permanent guests of the Turkish state. As a result, there was a shift in the metaphor of Syrians as “guests” (Arabic: diyuf; Turkish: misafir);2 it became a legal status that placed Syrians in limbo, rendering their everyday lives increasingly precarious and uncertain. Adding to displaced Syrians’ difficulties, the issuance of kimlifs had been inconsistent: despite being compulsory for Syrians from 2015 onward, they were issued to some but not to others in Gaziantep, as well as in other municipalities (Baban et al., 2017).

Umm Nidal continued,

Each time I want to go visit my relatives in Reyhahni [a border town located a three-hour drive away], I need to spend a day to get the travel authorization. You need to take the documents in the early morning to the wali and come back in the evening to get the authorization. Each time you go, you have to queue. I spend more time at the wali than on the way to Reyhanlı! And if you don’t get this authorization, you can get arrested and sent back to Syria!
Umm Nidal often invited me to come by the house she shared with her sister and the latter’s family in Gaziantep, where they found refuge in 2014. Umm Nidal fled Syria when her town was retaken by regime forces after being briefly liberated by the Free Syrian Army (FSA). She had participated in women’s protests, made scarves and small items decorated with the revolution’s flag, and cooked for protesters and rebels. In a context in which peaceful protesters were violently repressed, jailed, tortured, and forcibly disappeared by the Assad regime, she feared for her safety in a town under its control. Before the 2011 revolution she had been a schoolteacher, but in displacement she survived thanks to her embroidery work, along with remittances sent by her son, a refugee in Germany. We sat in her kitchen as she prepared coffee, lighting a cigarette and slowly mixing the coffee grounds into the pot of boiling water. As we continued to discuss Syrians’ guest status in Turkey, she said, “You know how much we pay for this flat? Eight hundred Turkish liras [then about US$200]. We pay twice the rent that our Turkish neighbors pay! And before Syrians arrived, this same flat used to cost 200 Turkish liras!”

The Turkish state’s policy toward displaced Syrians can best be understood as a series of scalar assemblages, or “hospitality assemblages”—each composed by the different positioning of actors (the state, locals, Syrians), registers (moral, legal), scripts (historical, religious), and spatiotemporal frames (Shryock, 2012). Moreover, processes of rescaling were central to performing, critiquing, and challenging hospitality. By analyzing the shifting arrangements of hospitality’s actors, registers, scripts, and spatiotemporal frames, and by understanding scale as both qualitative and quantitative, we can use the concept of rescaling to recast scholarly understandings of hospitality.

This article is based on fieldwork in the Syrian-Turkish borderland from 2014 to 2016, and on ethnographic engagement with Syrians from 2017 to 2019 in Gaziantep, where 17 percent of the city is Syrian—by 2017 which amounts to 350,000 Syrians, (Carpi & Şenoguz, 2019, p. 126). In spring 2014, I first went to the city of Antakya, Turkey, where I started my doctoral field research, focusing on the Syrian revolution of 2011. At the time, I planned to work with revolutionary youths and local councils in Syria’s liberated areas along the border. The worsening situation inside Syria, however, pushed me to remain on the Turkish side of the border and to relocate my work from Antakya to Gaziantep, where most of the revolutionary families were displaced and which revolutionary youths and organizations used as a back door. With Syrian displacement becoming more permanent in Gaziantep, Syrians’ spatiotemporal horizons shifted from promptly returning to Syria to being displaced for the long term, either in Turkey or Europe.

The initially peaceful revolution had turned into a full-fledged war with the emergence of different armed actors—the regime and allied Shia militias, the FSA and allied Islamic groups, the Kurdish YPG, and Daesh. It increasingly turned into proxy war as these groups were funded by foreign states that were later directly involved; the US-led coalition, for instance, began striking Daesh in 2014, and Russia began shelling rebel-held areas in 2015. Syrian flight to neighboring countries intensified. If displacement was mainly internal until 2012, the intensifying of the armed conflict between the Syrian regime and nonstate armed actors led to the massive and sudden flight of about 2 million Syrians from 2012 to 2015. In 2015, the UN reported that 8 million Syrians had been displaced internally and abroad. As the so-called refugee crisis reached European shores in the spring of 2015, European borders started to close as the EU pursued its strategy of containing Syrian refugees in Syria’s neighboring countries (Chatty, 2018, p. 232). By March 2017, more than half of the Syrian population was displaced, 7 million internally and 4.9 externally, while the number of Syrians who reached European shores was under 1 million (p. 243).

Since 2015, the question of Syrians’ legal status in Turkey has been a central preoccupation for my interlocutors. This has led them to critique and challenge Turkish hospitality through a series of discourses and practices that guide my reflections on hospitality’s scalar nature. My attention was thus brought to hospitality by my interlocutors’ insistence on designating their status in Turkey as that of “guest.” This was, for them, a powerful tool to denounce their precarious condition. In the aftermath of the Syrian revolution, karam (hospitality) became an acute political discourse about karamah (dignity). Both karamah and karam derive from the same root, krm; central to both concepts are respect and honor. They are deeply anchored in my interlocutors’ revolutionary project (Al-Khalili, forthcoming; Harkin, 2018).

Given my research aim and topic, I focus on Syrians’ lived experiences as “guests” of the Turkish state in Gaziantep, and on their conceptualizations of locals’ and the state’s practice of hospitality. Given that hospitality was both a state policy and a local practice, this article offers a scalar examination of Syrians’ daily encounters with the Turkish state, that is, their everyday interactions with state administrations and administrators (Gupta, 1995), their dealing with their legal status, and their relations with their Turkish neighbors. I describe my Syrian interlocutors’ lifeworlds in displacement; Syrians’ interactions with the Turkish state and local Turks; and Syrian uses of scripts, registers, and spatiotemporal frames. In doing so, I show the various scalar assemblages at play in this context, allowing the reader to better grasp the evolving and shifting meanings of what it is to be a guest or a host and who can be guest or host in a given context. Moreover, given the ethnic and socioreligious background of my interlocutors—they were mainly Sunni Arabs from the lower and lower-middle classes from peri-urban and rural areas—I do not analyze how Syrian Kurd- and Turkmen-specific experiences of hospitality vary within Gaziantep’s multiethnic environment. Another relevant characteristic is that most of the families I lived among were female headed and almost uniquely composed of female members, since the men were often in Europe or in Syria (Al-Khalili, forthcoming). My account of hospitality is therefore eminently gendered.

Analyzing Syrians’ experience and conceptualization of hospitality as a set of discourses and practices taking place on different scales, this article asks, How do scales’ flexibility affect hospitality, and what do they reveal about it? In the literature scales have been defined as framing (Caton, 1987) and as stagecraft (Shryock, 2012). Caton reveals the game of inclusion-exclusion at play in the shaping of hospitality; it can extend from an individual home to a village, and include or exclude different people from the practice of reciprocity.
Shryock shows the importance of inequality between guests and their hosts—and the latter’s sovereignty—since only designated areas of a house, for instance, are accessible to guests. In addition, according to Ben-Yehoyada (2016, p. 186), “acts of hospitality dramatize social relations by framing interaction between host and guest within temporal and spatial scales of inclusion and exclusion.”

The concept of scale, however, does not only encompass a geographic meaning: hospitality is a practice that cuts across different areas of inclusion and exclusion and defines them from the smaller to the bigger. Scales have to be understood as both quantitative and qualitative: they comprise both spatiotemporal frames and jurisdictions (Valverde, 2009). Bearing this in mind allows one to see how several (re)scalings can happen simultaneously and how they can overlap, creating several social, legal, and political differentiations, and shifting hospitable actors’ roles.

Such a plural understanding of scale shows how hospitable assemblages can be defined as scalar; they bring together different actors, scripts, and registers that refer to various spatiotemporalities, and they constantly redefine who are guests and hosts according to jurisdiction. This definition of hospitality as scalar reveals the failures and dangers of the state’s use of the hospitality idiom. Indeed, for the state to capture the idiomatic of hospitality precludes reciprocity, since the host state and the Syrian guests belong to different scales. Furthermore, laws cannot force local hosts to be hospitable to unknown guests, since this imperative invokes different registers (legal/moral) and corresponds to another scale (national/local). As a result, hospitality fails and hostility prevails, not so much because hostility and hospitality are intimately linked as reveals the concept of “hospitality” (Derrida, 1997), but because the juxtaposition of scales confuses scripts and registers.

Hospitality is classically described as protecting a guest, providing refuge from the guest’s enemies (Pitt-Rivers, 2012; Shryock, 2012). In a scalar shift, immigrants have been metaphorically presented as guests of the state they seek refuge in. Yet the law of hospitality is often presented as an ethical maxim and unwritten law, sharply opposed to the state’s written laws. As Derrida (1997) points out, the state’s rhetoric of hospitality paradoxically uses hospitality as a metaphor to speak of its guests’—the migrants’—obligation toward its hosts.

What happens, then, when the guest (immigrant)–host (state) dynamic ceases to be metaphorical and becomes the legal language of the state? What is the scale, or rather the scales, of the host-guest encounter in such a hospitable assemblage: Who are the guests, and who are the hosts? Moreover, can Syrians be good guests and Turks good hosts when the state captures hospitality’s discourse and practice? Finally, what are Syrians’ strategies to circumvent hospitality’s failures?

**HOSPITALITY: SCALES, REGISTERS, AND SCRIPTS**

In the context of Syrians’ displacement in Turkey, three hospitable assemblages, or three spatiotemporal scales, mobilize different “registers” and “scripts” (Ben-Yehoyada, 2016; see also Ben-Yehoyada, 2014). The first is the transnational space of the Umma, or community of Muslims, which presents coreligionists as “brothers” and recalls the time of the Prophet. It includes the Turkish term muhacir (from the Arabic muhajir), which originally refers to those who followed the Prophet from Mecca to Medina when he fled the city, a journey known as the hijra. As muhacirs and Muslim brothers, Syrians were thus presented by Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) as oppressed Muslims in need of temporary refuge by drawing on a religious register and a Quranic script.

The term muhacir historically refers to Balkan Muslims who were persecuted when the Ottoman Empire lost control of the western Balkans, and who fled back within its borders for refuge. This constitutes a second spatiotemporal scale drawing on a historical script and ethical register, one in which Syrian displacement echoes the Ottoman past; this is particularly resonant in Gaziantep, which for five centuries formed part of the Ottoman region of Aleppo before it was incorporated into the newly established Republic of Turkey in 1923.

Since then, the country’s national space has constituted a third hospitality assemblage that draws on a nationalist script and political register. In 2011 and 2012, most Syrians fleeing to Turkey stayed temporarily while their towns or villages were being shelled, returning home when the attacks stopped (Chatty, 2018). This was facilitated by Turkey’s open-door policy, which was in place until May 2015 and prolonged the border opening established in 2007, which was associated with a free trade and visa-free travel agreement between the two countries. But as the Syrian regime’s repression intensified, many Syrians were forced to flee and settle more permanently in Turkey. In answer to Syrian mass displacement, a novel legal status was created: a “temporary protection status” that defined Syrians as guests rather than refugees or asylum seekers. In this assemblage, the state uses both a legal register and a nationalist script.

By simultaneously mobilizing these hospitable assemblages, the Turkish state blurred the ethical, religious, and legal registers, as well as the nationalist, historical, and Quranic scripts. Moreover, and more significantly, the mixing of scales confused Syrian guests and Turkish hosts about their roles in this unusual hospitable assemblage. Indeed, what happens when the state captures the language of hospitality, collapsing the ethical and the legal? Furthermore, how can Syrians reciprocate state hospitality and local Turks host the state’s guests? In what follows, I will show how my interlocutors challenge state hospitality by refusing its “gifts” (cf. Alkan, 2021) and how, by proposing concurrent rescalings, they create hospitable assemblages in which they claim to be legally refugees—which invoke the state’s legal duties—while also claiming they should be guests of the local population, attributing to them ethical-religious duties.

This is thus an unusual situation, in which the language and registers are somehow inverted: the state speaks the moral language of hospitality, while refugees and their defenders speak the language of international and state laws (cf. Derrida, 1997; Rozakou, 2012). But far from the dream of a state offering unconditional hospitality (Derrida, 1997), which has been influential in the literature (Candea, 2012; Candea & da Col,
OF GUESTS AND REFUGEES

As the opening vignette suggests, the feeling that Syrians are not guests in Turkey—despite being officially labeled as such—was widespread among my interlocutors. They often hypothesized that the status of “guest” was a political tool employed by the Turkish state to give them fewer rights than they would have if they were refugees. When Umm Khaled, a housewife in her early 50s, visited the flat where I sublet a room from Dina, a single mother in her 40s, they heatedly debated Syrians’ situation in Turkey. Umm Khaled had fled her town with her daughter and two sons, leaving a martyred husband and son behind. Her sons were now in Sweden, but she stayed in Turkey with her five-year-old. While Umm Khaled’s daughter had a kimlik and went to a Turkish school, Dina’s children had not managed to get this document and, as a result, had been out of school for over six months.

As she served us coffee, Dina asked Umm Khaled about her living conditions in Turkey. Umm Khaled answered that she felt that it was much better than in Lebanon, where most of her family found refuge. To her, Turkey was now the best place for Syrians to live. Dina was furious. Umm Khaled, Dina said, should not be satisfied with the way she was treated here: “Turkey is not doing Syrians any favors.” In particular, Turkey had failed to fulfill its obligations to them, Dina argued. For Dina, Syrians were refugees according to international law. This was the argument I heard from many of my interlocutors who adopted the language of law and human rights, which had spread widely during the revolution. These interlocutors rescaled hospitality by invoking a different jurisdiction—the international—to critique the legal limbo the Turkish state had put them in. Turkey therefore had a duty to grant them refugee status and rights.

Although Dina agreed that the situation was worse in Lebanon and Jordan, she refused to call the situation in Turkey “good,” given their precarious status as “guests.” Knowing the mechanisms and dangers of hospitality and guests’ liminal position is why my interlocutors reject this status and claim to be refugees. Despite holding that life was better in Turkey than in Lebanon, however, Umm Khaled often expressed her feelings of being cheated by the Turkish government, especially after the EU-Turkey deal came into effect. She and many other Syrians expected to receive material benefits from the deal—rumor of being cheated by the Turkish government, especially after the EU-Turkey deal came into effect. She and many other Syri- of being cheated by the Turkish government, especially after the EU-Turkey deal came into effect. She and many other Syri-

The conversation between Umm Khaled and Dina hints at the ambiguous legal situation of forcibly displaced Syrians in Turkey who have been named guests by Turkish officials and administrative bodies, and listed as such in official circulars (Baban et al., 2017; Cavidan, 2012). Refugee status is geographically restricted in Turkey, where it can be granted only to European citizens, while others are considered temporary asylum seekers before being resettled in a third country through the UNHCR (Toğral Koca, 2016). Syrians have yet another status: labeled “guests,” they are granted a temporary protection status by the AFAD (the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority), if they have a kimlik. This status theo-

ematics and dangers of hospitality and guests’ liminal position is why my interlocutors reject this status and claim to be refugees. Despite holding that life was better in Turkey than in Lebanon, however, Umm Khaled often expressed her feelings of being cheated by the Turkish government, especially after the EU-Turkey deal came into effect. She and many other Syrians expected to receive material benefits from the deal—rumor had it that the EU had given Turkey large amounts of money to alleviate the Syrians’ situation (Dağtaş, 2017).

Umm Khaled could hardly survive on the small remittances sent by her sons, who were refugees in Europe. Yet, despite frequently queuing for hours with fellow housewives in front of organizations and governmental bodies that were said to provide aid, she received nothing.
RESCALING HOSPITALITY

HOSPITALITY’S JURISDICTIONS

It has been argued that when hosts welcome strangers temporarily, this “temporary inclusion” within their territory comes with “categorical exclusion” from the law (Ben-Yehoyada, 2016, p. 185): they have to respect local laws but do not have any rights within the legal system. Through the concept of jurisdiction, this could be reframed as a scalar problem: being “guests” of the Turkish state, Syrians do not fall under international protection, yet they have to navigate a plurality of competing and juxtaposed jurisdictions. Displaced Syrians have to respect Turkish laws and decrees with respect to health care, schooling, housing, work, and travel regulations, and they must deal with Syrian laws when it comes to family law, renewing passports, and the issuing of marriage and birth certificates. They can then turn to newly established free Syrian institutions or those of the regime. They are thus dealing with the institutions of a “wannabe state” (Navaro-Yashin, 2012, p. 114), or with the institutions of a regime that no longer recognizes them as citizens, since most of my interlocutors were wanted by the Syrian regime for their revolutionary activities.

This situation was particularly striking when Syrians sought to obtain or renew marriage certificates, birth certificates, and passports. My interlocutors strongly wanted their marriages registered in Syria, because this would allow their children to get Syrian identification documents, preventing them from being de facto stateless. Syrian documents were also necessary to get a family record book (daftar ‘ayileh), which was crucial for reuniting families in Europe or for returning to Syria. Since Turkey offered them only temporary protection status, many of my interlocutors felt that their present and future in the country were precarious, and so they sought official Syrian documents. Indeed, the latter were internationally recognized, whereas the Turkish documents were recognized only domestically and granted only limited rights.

This led to great uncertainty, as newly married couples and young parents struggled to find ways to obtain these documents. For example, Amal and Mohammad got married soon after arriving in Turkey but felt that they “were not really married” without a marriage certificate from Syria. There, one can have such a certificate established by a third party, so they paid someone to do this for them. Yet, since they were both wanted by the regime, it was refused because the groom had not completed his military service, which he actually had. After Amal gave birth, she felt the need to get their marriage registered even more urgently. She did not want her child to be stateless and born to an unmarried couple—as she would thus legally be born from an unknown father. To “regulate” their situation, they decided to hire a lawyer to bring their case to court in Syria. This procedure was very costly, since they had to pay several intermediaries; it was also emotionally painful, since their future was in the hands of the very regime that had displaced them. Eventually, they succeeded in getting their marriage registered—after a year of transactions with different fixers and after spending hundreds of US dollars.

In addition, Amal and Mohammad were not issued passports in Syria because they were wanted by the regime for their nonviolent activism in the revolution. Even before the revolution, most Syrians held only national identity cards; passports were used only by a minority of people wealthy enough to travel abroad. Yet, with mass displacement, getting a passport became crucial. This was the case for Amal and Mohammad, who were seeking Syria for the purpose of family reunification, in case one of them fled to Europe and had to obtain a proper ID for their newborn. There were two possible sources: the Syrian consulate or the Ezita (the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly known as the Coalition). Most of my interlocutors did not trust the passports issued by the Coalition, fearing that their validity would be only temporary; on the other hand, getting a passport from the regime meant enduring a humiliating and expensive process, costing at least US$800 for a passport that is valid from two to six years. Moreover, on different occasions the regime had declared a passport stolen, leading to the arrest of the holder and confiscation of the passport at a border, leaving the holder at the mercy of border control agents. Yet the regime’s passports are internationally recognized, and having proper documents was a major issue for the people with whom I worked. “I will have no choice but to take a boat when my passport expires”: I heard this many times from interlocutors who saw fleeing to Europe as a way to guarantee a clearer and more stable status. Obtaining documents would allow them to reside legally in a country and would guarantee that they would not have to deal with a regime that did not recognize their rights.

By co-opting the idiom of hospitality, the state thus puts Syrian guests in a legal and existential limbo, obliging them to turn to various authorities to claim their rights. Moreover, Syrians’ official guest status makes it impossible to apply for resettlement in a third country or for permanent residency or citizenship in Turkey. This pushed many of my interlocutors to try to reach another country where they would no longer be guests but refugees—a country where they would fall under a regime of law rather than one of favor; in other words, where they would have a “good life,” that is, a “dignified” life, thus pursuing their demand of dignity (karamah) that was central to their revolution.

GUESTS’ UNCERTAIN AND PRECARIOUS EVERYDAY

Despite affecting their legal and civil rights, Syrians’ status as guests had concrete and everyday effects on their lives. These difficulties were exacerbated by the inconsistent issuance of kimliks, which for many rendered the label of guest only a metaphor, not a legal status. There were thus two categories of “guests”: legalized and illegalized ones. Syrians unable to transpose their metaphorical status into a legal one were the most vulnerable, because their access to education and health care was not guaranteed. Moreover, Syrians were easy prey for employment exploitation, even those who held a kimlik, which did not grant the right to work. They often worked 10-to-12-hour shifts in local industries and workshops for a miserable salary.
Umm Khaled had lived in Turkey for a year and a half with her daughter and one of her sons. Then her sister, Umm Mohammad, arrived from Syria with her husband and three children. While Abu Mohammad and Umm Khaled’s son embarked on the perilous journey to Europe at the end of the summer of 2015, the two sisters stayed behind with their children. Since Umm Mohammad’s family was waiting to be reunited in Europe, the two sisters and four children shared a tiny studio flat. It was always overcrowded, because Umm Mohammad’s children had no kimlik and could not register for school.

During one of my visits, Umm Mohammad’s six-year-old fell and cut his eyebrow while playing with his siblings. Umm Mohammad and her sister were scared to take him to the state hospital without a kimlik. What if they got arrested and were sent back to Syria? After visiting a nearby pharmacy and being told the boy needed stitches, I accompanied Umm Khaled (who had a kimlik) to the hospital. At the first hospital, the staff refused to treat the boy. The second hospital had translators available to assist Arabic speakers, one of whom found a doctor who agreed to put stitches in Mohammad’s eyebrow. The translator warned us, though, that in two days a new regulation would forbid hospitals from treating Syrians without a kimlik for free, even in the case of emergency. This meant that Syrians without a kimlik, who were also the most vulnerable and precarious, would have to visit private hospitals and pay large sums of money to be treated. The two women were shaken by the news: What would happen if Umm Mohammad or one of her children needed urgent medical treatment?

Moreover, Umm Mohammad soon realized that she was stuck in an incongruous situation. In the winter of 2015, when she tried to travel to Ankara to start the family reunification process with her husband, the family was not allowed to board their plane. They had only their Syrian IDs. These had allowed travel inside Turkey until a couple of months earlier, when a travel authorization had become temporarily obligatory for any trip within Turkey during the general election period (summer 2015), and this had effectively become a permanent rule. The family’s nightmare started when they realized that they needed a kimlik to get this authorization, yet the municipality of Gaziantep no longer issued kimliks.

They were caught in a vicious circle: they could not go to Ankara without a travel authorization, but they needed a kimlik to get this authorization. Moreover, kimliks were not issued where they lived and they could not go to another city to apply for one without already having one. They eventually discovered, though, that rules, regulations, and laws were not always followed, and they boarded a bus whose driver agreed to overlook their lack of documents. Because laws and regulations change quite often and are not followed uniformly, many Syrians came to feel that they were living in a state of constant uncertainty. Moreover, they felt that they were not treated with dignity and were not safe in the country, and they yearned for a more stable and clear legal status, one that did not mirror hospitality and therefore did not involve its ambiguities and tensions.

The opacity of administrative processes and laws led Syrians to rely on Turkish-speaking people—often Syrian Turkmen friends or neighbors, or Turks who had picked up the language working in Iraq and the Gulf, or had learned Quranic Arabic in religious classes. My interlocutors kept the phone number of a Turkish-speaking person with them at all times and used to call such contacts to help them deal with their landlords, help them find a flat, or come to them with local administrative offices to help with paperwork. Such transactions were not always free, however, since some people had started to conduct business on the back of the opaque legal and administrative systems.

This instability and unreliability also made Syrians feel unsafe, reminding them of the corruption and the quickly changing “laws” at home. The lack of legal protections, the everyday precariousness, and the general uncertainty—these all epitomize Syria’s guest status and its scalar implications. It creates jurisdictional conflicts between different authorities and legislation, as well as scalar conflicts between the state and the local population.

**AMBIGUITIES AND AMBIVALENCE OF HOSPITALITY AND HOSTILITY**

“Did you hear about the little clay houses?” Leila asked me when we met in a café. Leila, a woman in her early 30s whom I met through my volunteer work at a grassroots organization, had graduated with a bachelor in English literature just before the revolution started. She later fled to Turkey, being at risk of arrest for organizing campaigns of civil disobedience. When I told her that I had not heard the story, she said, “Everyone is speaking about it! Turkey is building small clay houses on the [Syrian side of the] border, and they are planning to send us all there.” As the campaign for the Turkish general election was raging in the summer of 2015, and as “the Syrian issue” had become a major concern, this story forecasting the imminent return of all Syrians to Syria—in line with the rhetoric of several candidates—circulated quickly around Gaziantep.

This story gives a sense of how my interlocutors sensed a hostility that contrasted with the hospitality implied in their earlier designation as “guests” and “brothers” by the ruling AKP. It also gives a sense of the insecurity they felt in Turkey, believing they could be sent back to Syria at any moment. Syrians saw life in Turkey as tied to the results of the general election, and the story about clay houses reflected a new reality: as of 2015, Turkey had closed its Syrian border and effectively rescinded its open-door and nonrefoulement policies. Thus, the risk of deportation to Syria was real for Syrians who had entered Turkey clandestinely and for those who did not have kimliks or residency. Ultimately, the story illustrates that the welcome Syrians had received from their “host brothers” had turned hostile. The rhetoric of hospitality had shifted from the ethical-religious to the political, and hospitality later became a (geo)political bargaining chip. But what are the local consequences of these shifts?

Classic accounts of hospitality have shown that it is an ambivalent offering. At its heart are power relations that keep the guest at the mercy of the host (Pitt-Rivers, 2012). Tellingly, to the Balga Bedouins, for example, hospitality is a synonym for warfare and a question of sovereignty (Shryock, 2004, p. 52; see...
also Fausto, 2012; Marsden, 2012). Moreover, host-guest relations are constantly at risk of collapsing into enmity, oscillating between suspicion and trust, and the guest can rapidly be perceived as an enemy or a spy (Derrida, 1997). In fact, a guest is always a potentially dangerous Other (Pitt-Rivers, 2012, p. 503).

But the hostility that Syrians felt emanated not only from state officials but also from local residents, who increasingly discriminated against Syrians and committed acts of violence against them, as I came to witness. One evening around 9:00, as a dozen of us were dining at Leila’s place, the police arrived and violently entered to inspect the flat, followed by angry neighbors. Leila got a Turkish-speaking friend on the phone and was told that the neighbors had complained about the noise. This was surprising, since there was no music and we were rather quiet. Although they could see that it was a simple dinner, the police decided to check the rental contract and the tenant’s identification documents. Seeing her blue Syrian passport, they threatened that if a similar incident happened again, they would take her to a nearby camp—whose official name, ironically, was Guest Camp—although this was an illegal threat.

A couple of days later, a group of young Syrians driving in the city, playing Arabic music through wide-open windows, were attacked by a group of Turkish men armed with wooden sticks. They went to the police to file a complaint, but the policemen refused their request, even though their bodies bore marks of the attack. In the summer of 2015, social media was filled with reports of acts of violent hostility (Toğrul Koca, 2016), which reinforced Syrians’ feelings of being unwelcome and unsafe in Turkey. These situations remind my Syrian interlocutors of their betwixt-and-between situation: owing to their guest status, they were subject to Turkish law and sovereignty, but they did not have rights within it. Moreover, these experiences show that the state’s discourse of hospitality did not imply locals’ hospitality. By capturing hospitality’s legal and ethical registers, the state did not leave any space for locals to participate in this hospitable assemblage. As Dağıtaş (2017) shows in her study of hospitality in Antakya, locals felt that they had no place in the state’s equation and claimed to apply hospitality on their own terms—following regional and religious traditions (see also Alkan, 2021). They refused, however, to be imposed on as the hosts of “unknown” guests (Dağıtaş, 2017, p. 671). Moreover, by constantly emphasizing the hospitality discourse and by publicly displaying its generosity toward Syrian guests, the Turkish state alienated its own population, prompting growing hostility toward Syrians (Carpì & Şenoğuz, 2019; Dağıtaş, 2017).

**THE SYRIANIZATION OF GAZIANTEP**

Yet, since hospitality has to be a reciprocal practice to exist, Syrians could challenge state hospitality by refusing its gifts and favors. This was most visible through the cultivation of a Syrian city within Gaziantep, a phenomenon that can be described as the city’s “Syrianization,” to borrow Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh’s (2016) concept. Syrians’ subversion of their guest status—and consequently of their lives in legal limbo—is made clear with the emergence of “Syrian alternatives” in the field of employment, education, and health care. The creation of these alternatives clearly marks a refusal of the state’s hospitality (which officially provides its Syrian guests free education and health care).

Take, for instance, the Syrian medical clinics that have increasingly appeared in Gaziantep. They are illegal but tolerated by the authorities as long as they treat only Syrian patients. My friend Amal preferred them over the mainstream health care providers because she didn’t “trust Turkish doctors,” she said. Moreover, she would need to supply her own translator when visiting the hospital, so when she became pregnant, she chose to visit a Syrian gynecologist in an “underground” practice. It was located in a recently built district inhabited mostly by Syrians, and occupied the ground floor of a residential building that used to be a grocery shop. The glass doors had been covered with white paint and newspapers so that the space looked empty from the outside. In the waiting room were a dozen plastic chairs and a small school desk for the receptionist. When Amal knocked at the door, a little girl looked through the newspapers and turned toward someone inside to see what she should do. She let us in, and we entered the waiting room, where a receptionist asked Amal for her card, a “makeshift” thing with a number and the patient’s name (Navarro-Yashin, 2012). There was a pile of business cards on the desk, where a blue box was being used as a till. The receptionist sat there whenever she was not running to open the door for patients before quickly locking it behind them.

The doctor’s room was small: it was equipped with examination tools, including an ultrasound device, but it lacked the equipment necessary to take samples. The doctor asked us to sit in front of her large desk and looked for Amal’s record in a ledger where she reserved a double page for notes on each patient. The desk was separated by a wooden screen from the medical chair and the ultrasound device. After repeating “Bismillah” (In the name of God) in a low voice a couple of times, the doctor turned on the ultrasound screen and showed us a small black bag surrounding a tiny, pulsating white spot—a heart. She praised God (“Alhamdulillah”) as she explained that we were seeing the embryo. As the examination ended, the doctor prescribed a blood test and some medicine for Amal. She wrote the name of the medicines on a small piece of paper that she signed as she would on an official prescription. On another piece of paper she listed the blood tests to be run. Neither document could be used at a pharmacy or a non-Syrian practice.

After we left, Amal stopped by another practice for the blood tests. It was quite hard to find, so the doctor met us at the bus stop and walked us to the basement, a former warehouse, that became his practice. It was very dark and dingy; a couple of seats faced a desk, since there was no place for a waiting room. On one side there was a big chair where Amal sat for the blood sample to be taken. After the nurse’s job was done, the doctor told Amal she would soon receive the results via WhatsApp.

To explain her visits to these underground and unusual clinics, rather than to public hospitals, Amal repeatedly said, “I don’t trust Turkish doctors.” This seemed to be a quite widespread feeling among my interlocutors, who preferred to
depend on their own network of health care facilities. But this also illustrates Syrians’ refusal of Turkish hospitality, here of free health care for kimlik holders (cf. Alkan, 2021). Ironically, free access to health care was a main point of contention among the Turkish locals, who were unhappy with the state’s dispensing free health care to Syrian guests (Dağtaş, 2017). Moreover, the avoidance of Turkish health care facilities through the use of their own underground and illegalized practices demonstrates Syrians’ ability to reject their state-imposed guest status, thereby violating hospitality’s rules as well as Turkish sovereignty.

Syrians’ growing presence within their host’s space was also visible through the increasing prevalence of Arabic script and Syrian shops, restaurants, organizations, private schools, and cultural centers, along with grassroots and civil society organizations, governmental bodies, and opposition institutions. With this complex network, Syrians created their own city within a city, making it possible to navigate Gaziantep consuming almost only Syrian goods and without speaking Turkish. This was reinforced by their renaming of Gaziantep’s main landmarks. A square always crowded with pigeons was, for instance, renamed Sahet al-Hamamat (the Square of Pigeons) and a street full of baklava shops became Shara’ al-Baqlawa (Baklava Street). Through such practices, Syrians propose another form of stagecraft that competes with Turkish hospitality at both the local and state scales.

The challenge to Turkish hospitality was particularly visible in the consumption of Syrian food. Offering food is often defined as one of the host’s primary obligations, but many Syrians circumvented this by bringing and consuming their own. Before the border was sealed, my interlocutors would regularly bring food over from Syria. As I met with friends at one of our frequent evening gatherings, one of them told us that a Syrian man entering Turkey with 30 kilos of meat had been arrested at the border. This aroused much laughter at our table as my friends imagined the surprise of the border guards, but it did not seem extravagant to them. They remembered Syrian products and food with intense nostalgia. Dina explained that the taste of Syrian food was irreplaceable, and she had struggled for several weeks to get some olive oil from her parents’ village on the other side of the border. When I was invited for a meal, the products from Syria were always pointed out to me to taste first. Although consuming their own food is common in immigrant communities, it is not only that Syrians preferred to eat their own cuisine but also that, as I described above, they were bringing fruit, olive oil, and meat (i.e., raw rather than cooked food) from a war zone into a borderland city. Yet there was no climate difference, for instance, that would make it impossible to find similar fruits, vegetables, and meat in Gaziantep.

These practices illustrate the questioning and the subversion of the guest-host dynamics defined by the state, as well as the Syrianization of Gaziantep as Syrians refuse Turkish hospitality. This rejection of state-led hospitality owes to the impossibility of Syrians’ reciprocating hospitality, because the host and guests are not on the same scale. In addition, this refusal of state hospitality was linked to Syrians’ rejection of their infraregal position and their replacing a logic of favor with a legal one. But this is also intimately connected to the desire to be in the host position, since this position is associated with honor, prestige, and power, whereas guests fall under hosts’ sovereignty (Dağtaş, 2017; Shryock, 2012).

On the scale of local population encounters, Syrians challenged their status as guests, contributing to the inversion of the guest-host paradigm. My interlocutors repositioned themselves as the hosts by offering food to their Turkish hosts, among other practices. My interlocutors stressed local people’s lack of hospitality and visible hostility. Indeed, since hospitality is a constant negotiation and (re)definition of assemblages, Syrians challenged and subverted their condition by creating new hospitality assemblages—playing on scales, registers, and scripts to redefine who is host and who is guest.

**SCALAR SUBTERFUGES: SYRIANS AS HOSTS**

There was this newly married woman who had just arrived in our village. Her husband told her to go visit the neighbors and to come back immediately after she drank coffee. But he insisted that she wait until she had coffee. So she went to her neighbors and they served her tea, mate, then fruits. Then it was time for lunch, then dinner, but by nighttime they had still not drunk coffee. Only the next morning at breakfast was she served coffee. So she left very quickly and came back home. Her husband asked, “Where were you all this time?” And she answered, “They just served the coffee now!”

Umm Khaled laughed loudly as she finished telling this anecdote about hospitality on one of our visits to see Umm Zayd, her friend and former neighbor. They had fled from the regime army together with their children when their town fell under heavy fire. Umm Zayd’s sons and husband had fled for Europe, and she was now waiting with her 18-year-old daughter for family reunification. As we arrived at her place and were invited to drink mate, Umm Khaled humorously pointed out the peculiar customs of their area, where coffee, as in other parts of Syria, remained the symbol and cornerstone of karam (hospitality).

At the scale of Syrians’ encounters with their Turkish neighbors and city dwellers, Syrians challenged their guest position through discourses and practices that placed them in the host’s position and local Turks in a guest’s position. I heard many stories praising Syrian hospitality, challenging the idea that Syrians were guests in Turkey, and furnishing a standpoint from which to criticize Turkish hospitality. When I visited and stayed at Umm Riyad’s place, her son complained about the way Syrians were treated in Turkey. To reinforce his depiction of his Turkish hosts as bad, he recalled how he had himself been a good host in Syria:

> When the Lebanese fled and came to Syria, we gave them everything they needed. Believe me, the camp they stayed in had nothing to do with the camps Syrians are put in here! They had...
everything they needed. We were bringing them the food from the best restaurants and from our mothers’ kitchens! When we asked them if they needed something, they asked for hair gel and arguleh [hookah]! Why? Because they had all the rest!

His mother added, “In the South they didn’t even stay in camps. We hosted them in our homes.” The example of Iraqi refugees was presented as another token of Syrians’ exemplary hospitality. As Umm Nidal complained about her rent increase, she gave the attitude of Syrians toward Iraqis as an example of good host behavior. “When the Iraqis came,” she said, “we left our homes to them and went to rent worse ones.” This was not a view shared by everyone. Saleh, a second-generation Palestinian refugee in Syria, explained that Syrians had also taken advantage of Iraqis by subletting their houses for a higher price (Kastrinou & Knoerk, n.d.). As in Turkey, this had caused problems for the locals in Syria, since rents had increased for them too, he argued. Umm Nidal disagreed. “They had a lot of money, and they agreed to rent our houses at such a price, which created problems for the rest of us!” Saleh drew to her attention that this was exactly what the Turks were saying about Syrians and added, “The Iraqis left with all the money they had, and so did we. They didn’t have the luxury to bargain over their rent, and we don’t either.”

Through such stories, hospitality was framed as a Syrian virtue not shared by their Turkish hosts. This idea was supported by videos and articles that created a buzz on social media when the “refugee crisis” peaked in the summer of 2015. They showed how Greeks had been welcomed by Syrians when they fled their homes during the Second World War and how this hospitality had to be reciprocated now that Syrians were seeking refuge. This made my Syrian interlocutors wonder if Turks realized that, under other circumstances, they could have been the ones seeking refuge, and that they could be asking for hospitality in the future.

On the other hand, Turks had symmetrically reversed stories that depicted Syrians as bad guests: on the street and in Turkish newspapers there were widespread stories of Syrians eating in restaurants without paying and sometimes beating up the owner (Dağtaş, 2017). Such stories led me to interrogate the discourses around bad guests and bad hosts as moral tales and narratives about ethical duties rather than recalling real events. These narratives show that “hospitality more often than not seems to be a common language in which to argue and disagree, a language of accusation and disappointed hopes, a language of insult and wounded pride. Hospitality, it seems, is ‘schismogenic’” (Candea, 2012, p. 46). Indeed, critique of hosts by guests is a widespread phenomenon (Herzfeld, 1987; Shryock, 2008); hospitality is often thought to be better elsewhere: in the distant past or in different geographic locations (Shryock, 2008, p. 406).

Moreover, in practice, Syrians became hosts to different types of guests: the anthropologist, relatives and friends arriving from Syria, Syrian friends and acquaintances on social occasions, and even their Turkish hosts. Like any anthropologist, I became the guest of my female interlocutors,7 hospitality being “the unavoidable condition of possibility of ethnography” (Candea & da Col, 2012, p. 3). My Syrian hosts showed their hospitality by offering me coffee and large amounts of food, and by welcoming me with endless pronouncements of “ahlan wa sahlın” (welcome) and “beit beitek” (my house is yours). I became the guest of Syrians who were themselves guests in Turkey, and I was also a familial guest for many of the female-headed households I lived with, with the women often calling me “Kenetna” (our daughter-in-law), since I was engaged to a Syrian man. This paradoxical situation was pushed to its extreme when, arriving from a besieged area with only a few bags, Umm Zein—finding me at her mother’s place—greeted me with a small gift: a tiny plastic bottle of perfume she had brought all the way from Syria. Hence, the significance of hospitality was such that even in such precarious positions, Syrians made sure to reciprocate with small gifts (Alkan, 2021).

Newly arrived Syrians were also hosted by friends and relatives. After they arrived in Gaziantep, displaced Syrians would often live in their relatives’ or friends’ homes until they could find their own place, often nearby and through the same local networks. Some buildings and neighborhoods thereby became mostly inhabited by Syrians. With time, and as they became more familiar with the way things worked, Syrians started to move to other neighborhoods, often to bigger and more comfortable flats. Yet, even when they lived in predominantly Turkish buildings and neighborhoods, the two populations rarely mixed, by my interlocutors’ account and experience at the time of fieldwork.8 This was linked not only to the language barrier but also to mutual hostility (Carpi & Şenoğuz, 2019; Dağtaş, 2017). But at the flat I shared with Dina in a building inhabited only by Turks, some of our female neighbors started to visit regularly.

Syrians’ hosts were thus also treated as their guests. This inversion of the guest-host dynamic is inscribed in Syria’s history as a place of refuge (Chatty, 2018), and it shows that hospitality can be turned into a game of power and sovereignty (Shryock, 2012, p. 20). Hence, my interlocutors used this to invent power relations between hosts and guests, Turks and Syrians. As Dina hosted our Turkish neighbors, she was excited to tell me while we prepared plates of fruit in the kitchen that our guests were very impressed that “although [she] fled [her] country, [she] was able to serve them such nice fruit” (cf. Alkan, 2021). She was proud to be able to impress her guests and, by doing so, to challenge Turks’ views of Syrians.

By playing with the registers of hospitality, and by using different historical scripts, my Syrian interlocutors shift their position from that of guest to host, challenging Turkish sovereignty at the scale of the state and of the local population. Eventually, these rescalings point to Turks’ and Syrians’ exhaustion with the overwhelming duties that hospitality imposes on both hosts and guests, and the impossible situation Syrians and Turks are put in by a state that captures the hospitality idiom, exacerbating tensions between the two populations. Indeed, in co-opting hospitality as an ethical-religious register, the state pushes Syrians to dream of a land where hospitality is not “duty-based” but effectively “rights-based” (Chatty, 2017); where, in other words, they could be extracted...
from the burden of hospitality’s reciprocity and duties: where they would be refugees rather than guests.

HOSPITALITY’S SPATIOTEMPORAL HORIZONS

“The life of Syrians in Turkey is becoming exactly like their lives in Lebanon, and maybe even worse! All of [Turkish president Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan’s statements about Syrians aren’t worth a cent!” This was posted to Facebook by Zeina, a friend in her mid-20s who had been living in Turkey for two years after also living in Lebanon for two. Appearing in the spring of 2017, Zeina’s post speaks to the degrading situation of Syrians in Turkey, the increasing uncertainty, and the ever-growing feeling of being unwelcome and unsafe. After two years in Lebanon, the young woman had come with her mother to Turkey as their lives were becoming harsher in Beirut. After two years in Turkey, however, she found herself in a similar situation: working was made harder by new regulations and a crackdown on organizations, and this time Zeina wondered where she would go next. “I fled from Syria to Lebanon, then when the situation got worse I came here. And now what? I have already started my life all over again twice, I don’t want to have to start all over again for the third time!” As the situation was going from bad to worse, Zeina, who was planning to get married to her Syrian fiancé and start a family, could not help asking, “Why would we get married? Do we even have a future in this country?”

When I returned to Gaziantep in March 2017, the legal status of Syrians had changed dramatically. On the one hand, those who held work permits and university degrees were now being given the opportunity to apply for citizenship. On the other, Syrians working without a permit, or with a permit issued in a city different from the one they inhabited, lived with the constant risk of being sent back to Syria or deported to Sudan—the only country where Syrians could enter and remain without a visa in 2017. This risk pushed those who could to work from home in order to avoid arrest and deportation—which, in turn, would lead to a loss of job opportunities—as employers feared being harassed by the police. This novel configuration seems, however, to be symptomatic of the temporary protection status, which, owing to its lack of clarity and weakness, leads to ambiguities and exacerbates Syrians’ uncertain and precarious position. This situation is emblematic of the state’s conflations of hospitality’s ethical and legal registers, and it was intensified with the deportation of Syrians back to northern Syria in the wake of the ruling AKP party’s defeat of the opposing Republican People’s Party in the 2019 Istanbul mayoral election (al-Mehdi, 2019). In this context, as in those of the 2015 general election and the 2017 constitutional referendum, Syrian guests clearly become a political bargaining chip as opposing political parties promise their bases that, once in office, they will deport Syrians.

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By focusing on Syrians’ forced displacement in Turkey, this article has suggested new ways of looking at hospitality, con-
of a defeated revolution amid precarious displacement, new migratory dreams and horizons have emerged. Syrians seek karamah (dignity) rather than karam (hospitality/generosity). By claiming a dignified life, my Syrian interlocutors aspire to be subjects of law rather than religious piety and moral duties. Ultimately, through their use of the idiom of hospitality, my interlocutors draw a definition of what a dignified life in exile should look like, tracing a line between the fight for dignity at home and in displacement, a line that calls for closer attention to the nexus between revolution and migration.

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ENDNOTES

1 I have anonymized all my interlocutors for reasons of safety and privacy.
2 I have transliterated Arabic words based on the simplified system recommended by the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. I have also tried to stay as close as possible to my interlocutors’ Levantine dialect in transliterating terms. For instance, I write diyaf rather than dayaf.
3 As part of EU-Turkey deal, the EU agreed to provide 3 billion euros to Turkey (Smeets & Beach, 2020, p. 158).
4 As addressed in the conclusion, the situation has evolved over the years. The UNHCR is, for instance, allowed to resettle specific numbers and categories of Syrians, and they can apply for Turkish citizenship following specific criteria. These two options, however, concern only a small minority of Syrians. Moreover, even when successful in obtaining resettlement in a third country, Syrians still fall under Turkey’s jurisdiction to leave the country, meaning they need an exit visa that, for those who do not hold kimlik, is hard to obtain.
5 Even a kimlik, however, did not assure Syrian children’s access to schools, since their registration could be refused by the school management and many could not afford the cost of transportation or taking their children out of work (Bahal et al., 2017).
6 Originally from South America, yerba mate is a tea consumed in great quantities in some parts of Syria.
7 My interlocutors were both men and women, but I could be the guest of only my male interlocutors outdoors (in cafés or restaurants), since I could not be alone with male youths, in accordance with social norms. Moreover, most of the families I worked with were composed of (almost) only female adult members (Al-Khalili, forthcoming).
8 There were, however, as in Alkan’s (2021) account of Turkish hospitality in Istanbul, some local initiatives as a cultural center and a few local organizations working with Syrians. Yet their work remained confidential and unknown to most of my interlocutors. Moreover, the situation in border cities was more complex and tense (Dağtaş, 2017), particularly in Gaziantep, which witnessed anti-Syrian riots (Carpi & Şenoğuz, 2019).

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