Migration as a Site of Political Struggle

An Evaluation of the Istanbul Migrant Solidarity Network

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Abstract: In order to introduce a discussion on the possibilities and limits of the migrant struggle in Turkey, this article examines a particular grassroots organization — the Migrant Solidarity Network — that was formed to confront the cycle of uncertainty and precariousness that defines the migrant experience. By contextualizing its emergence, trajectory and ultimately dissolution in the shifting framework of the migration regime as well as in alterations of the radical left scene in Turkey in the 2000s, this article traces structural and contingent dynamics that characterize a terrain of political contestation wherein paternalistic, technocratic, and solidarity perspectives are in fierce antagonism.

Keywords: migrant activism, migration regime, charity, Syrian refugees, Turkey

Today, the dynamism of international migration has become the topic of a protracted, international struggle involving many actors on different scales and, therefore, different institutionalisms. The regulations, practices, and tools regarding migration can only be understood in terms of this ongoing struggle. For instance, as de Genova (2016) argues in regards to the discussion around the recent European ›refugee crisis,‹ »[b]orders are not inert, fixed or coherent ›things.‹ Rather [...] borders are better seen as socio-political *relations*. What is at stake in these relations, which are indeed relations of *struggle*, is the rendering of borders into seemingly fixed and stable thing-like realities with a semblance of objectivity, durability and intrinsic power.« The instruments developed by states and international institutions, their practices and discourses, aim to ›naturalize‹ a set of phenomena that cannot be assumed and which therefore have a social-political character. Yet, this effort to naturalize is a subject of struggle in itself, and migrants themselves are the prevailing side of it (Friese/Mezzadra 2010; Ataç et al. 2015).

When we take migration as a site of struggle and we take migrants as the subject of this struggle, we come one step closer to understanding both the actions of those migrants in their daily lives as well as the meaning, within the context of present-day relations of power and exploitation, of the emergence of political-social movements around the concept of migration. In today's world, characterized by a multitude of

(economic, ecological, and democratic) crises, migration occupies the intersection of number of axes of conflict that traverse the global political topography from one end to the other.

Departing from this particular point of view, in this article I aim to introduce a discussion on the possibilities and limits of the migrant struggle in Turkey, a country that has recently become one of the main sites of global migration. It should go without saying that such a discussion has more than one aspect. Because of this, at this juncture, I limit myself to evaluating a particular organizing experience. I focus on the Migrant Solidarity Network (MSN), a group that has aimed to stand in solidarity with the increasing numbers of migrants, by regarding migration as a site of political conflict. This must inevitably be a retrospective evaluation, since the MSN, after emerging in the fall of 2009, was only three years in existence. Also, just when the arrival of Syrians changed the migratory dynamics of Turkey, its regular activity ended. Therefore, I not only examine the conditions that led to the formation of the MSN, the group's structure, discourse and practice, and the social needs it responded to, but I also try to understand the reasons for its inability to adapt to new conditions. As one of its members who witnessed the period from its inception to its dissolution, I attempt to place the MSN experience within the context of a newly emerging migrant struggle in Turkey and interpret its lasting organizational forms, discourses, and practices as products of a transitional period.

BACKGROUND

In the 2000s, Turkey, a country that was to have one of the highest populations of refugees following the arrival of Syrians in 2011, witnessed the maturing of migratory dynamics that had started in the 1980s. During this period, the quantity and pattern of migration, and relatedly the migration regime and ultimately the migrant experience itself became fundamentally complex. The factors that led to the birth of the MSN, and shaped it, are directly related to this complexity.

Migration to the country during the 20th century was mostly based on the movement of groups of Turkish origin living in nation-states formed out of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Since this kind of migration allowed the Turkification of the newly formed nation-state of Turkey, it was accepted as state policy. Since those arriving (from Balkan countries such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Bulgaria, for instance) were seen as ›acceptable migrants‹ from the point of view of religion and ethnicity, they were incorporated into a relatively tolerant migration regime (Danış/Parla 2009). After the 1980s, both the identity of those migrating to Turkey as well as the pattern

of migration changed in an unprecedented manner (Erder 2000; Kirişci 2000). First of all, in accordance with past laws that only defined ethnic Turks in Turkey as »immigrants,« those arriving in this latest phase of migration were not immigrants but »foreigners« (Parla 2011: 74). A process of citizenship for those coming from war-torn countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan, or from ex-Soviet states like Armenia, Moldova, or Georgia, or those coming from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa had not been prepared politically or legally, as had been with the previous migrants. Second of all, the motivation of those who were migrating was changing, which meant that the pattern of migration was changing as well. Even if in reality there has been a constant flux between these categories, this new migrant population consisted of those who were coming to Turkey to work, who were applying for international asylum, or who were only going to stay temporarily on their way to Europe. And so, a group emerged who found themselves, starting with their legal status, imprisoned in uncertainty (Danış/Soysüren 2014: 19). The majority of this group consisted of undocumented migrants that were officially categorized as ›illegal,‹ ›unregistered,‹ or ›irregular.‹ The official estimates on the ratio of ›irregular‹ immigrants among the whole migrant population indicate that Turkey progressively evolved into both an immigration and a transit country in the 2000s (İçduygu 2015).

But what sets the 2000s apart is not only that the amount of migration to Turkey had increased, it is also that the state, in trying to effectively manage and regulate population flows to the country, started to institutionalize, albeit sometimes slowly and inconsistently, a new migration regime. In reality, the formation of an ›effective‹ migration regime in terms of functioning only occurred after 2010 within the context of the shake-up caused by the Syrian refugees (Akalın 2016). However, one could claim that even prior to this turn of events, and more so due to the imperatives of the continuing relationship with the EU, the Turkish state had realized the changing position and role the country had taken within the global movement of migrants. The legal accords and regulations, the increasing number of detention centers, the signed agreements of readmissions, and the harsher border protections have all come about within this context. According to the security-focused »fortress Europe« paradigm dominant in EU institutions, the externalization of the European border regime to include neighboring countries necessitated a more rigid migration regime in Turkey (Hess 2010). Nevertheless, this is not just a top-down relationship; the main factor determining the character of Turkey's new migration regime has been the tense and mutually pragmatic relationship with the EU (Genç/Heck/Hess, forthcoming).

The most direct effect that the strengthening of the migration regime had on the lives of migrants was that they were imprisoned into a constantly repeating state of uncertainty (Biehl 2015). The migrant, whether in the relationship entered into with

official institutions or within various public arenas, is in a constant cycle of precarity (Eder/Özkul 2016; Baban/Ilcan/Rygiel 2017).

FORMATION OF THE MSN

On September 20, 2009, a small uprising took place at the immigrant detention center in Kumkapı, Istanbul. More than a hundred migrants protested against the harsh conditions inside, the obstacles to legal assistance, and the administrative supervision measures, which led to unknown detention periods. In these days Iranian migrants held at a different center on the border with Bulgaria went on a hunger strike. A similar uprising had taken place a year before, also in Kumkapı, and almost a thousand migrants tried to make their voices heard to the outside world. A cry was arising from the detention centers, yet it did not reach beyond a small number of civil society organizations.

Despite the structural transformations in the 2000s in terms of the quantity/pattern of migration and the migration regime in Turkey, the left had been inattentive to the needs and demands of migrants at that time. One might justify such inattentiveness by referring to the radical left's decreased organizational capacity — which indeed got worse than in the years following the 1980 coup d'état — or to challenging topics that it had to tackle with — e.g. the spiraling effects of the state violence against the Kurdish political opposition and the sheer political and economic repression that the organized working class felt due to the neoliberal offense. Notwithstanding the severity of the political climate of the period, however, I believe deep-seated ideological tendencies of the leftist scene in Turkey have to be taken into account as well to grasp the roots of this indifference. Since major strands of the radical left have traditionally developed an inward-looking orientation and not regarded internationalism as a genuine matter of political-strategic principle, issues relating to migration could not have been translated into terms of labor exploitation and political/economic domination and were hence neglected to a great extent or regarded at best as a matter of legal procedure to be left to NGO's.

Against this backdrop, as a group of activists who had met for the first time on September 17, we issued a solidarity call following the uprising and organized a protest for September 26. The statement which was read at the protest stated that »everyone has the unconditional and unregulated freedom of movement and the freedom to live wherever they want, and whether adult or child, nobody should be detained for using these rights and freedoms.« A call was issued to close the detention centers and to start mobilizing to end the migrant repression, imprisonment, and deportation.

The first meetings and solidarity events came out of a summer campaign, DirenIstanbul (*ResIstanbul*), leading up to the protests of the IMF-WB summit set to happen in October 2009. But the positive reception the call received allowed the initiative to continue after the summit, and the group named itself the MSN in February of 2010.

Our goal identified during the first discussions was to construct a solidarity network confronting the cycle of uncertainty, futurelessness, and precariousness that defined the migrant experience. It is possible to untangle the two basic political arguments inherent in this perspective.

First, despite their differences in terms of legal categories, we assumed that migrants, due to their connection through migration, were subjects of the same struggle — as underlined in one of our main slogans, »Nobody escapes without reason!« (*Kimse nedensiz kaçmaz!*). The state institutions, international organizations, and mainstream civil society organizations who regulate the area of migration are inclined to translate the analytical distinctions between various migrant categories into political distinctions. The aim of this rhetorical maneuver is to criminalize and control the movement of migration and the migrants themselves, and consequently it allows the appearance of dichotomies widely accepted by the public. Thus, the ›deserving‹ refugee is placed in a position as opposed to the ›bogus‹ migrant looking to exploit the asylum system, or similarly, the political refugee escaping persecution is placed in a privileged position as opposed to the economic migrant searching for narrow-minded material benefits (Fassin 2016). Conversely, we argued that in practice these distinctions were senseless, and that the common struggle of migrants was vital in order to undercut institutional interventions into the sphere of migration.

Second, we asserted that since citizens and migrants are subjugated to common relationships of exploitation and power, although in different spheres of social life, then the struggle they set out on should also be a common one. We thus formulated a second slogan that points to the common fate of migrants and citizens: We are all migrants; we are here, we will stay here, we will live! (*Hepimiz göçmeniz; buradayız, kalacağız, yaşayacağız!*). Undoubtedly, the different legal statuses between migrants and citizens determine the forms of exploitation and domination. Therefore, the two categories can never be reduced to one another. While not ignoring this reality, we argued that the division between citizen and non-citizen could only be overcome by a partnership in struggle. With this perspective in mind, we issued a call to build a common struggle against labor exploitation, patriarchal and heteronormative domination, and ecological destruction.

STRUCTURE OF THE MSN

In its basis, the MSN was the organizing of a network. In principle, decisions and the direction were determined in weekly meetings open to all. The necessary steps for advancing the decisions were taken by the various working groups of the network (groups that aimed to organize among lawyers, medical staff, and teachers, for instance), while discussions and evaluations that were larger in scope took place in forums with a more general call. Additionally, in terms of the participants of the network, I can argue that throughout the four years of the MSN's activity there was a great deal of continuity. This continuity allowed the different circles within the network, which normally only interacted loosely, to simmer and with time form a common political vision.

Moreover, one must acknowledge a new political generation that shaped the profile of the activists, their repertoire of action, the representations and narratives they created. The majority of those who attended the meetings of the MSN were individuals who became politicized in the 2000s in Istanbul. We, while feeding off of different spaces of struggle such as student movements, environmental struggles, urban movements, or the feminist movement, also saw ourselves as a part of the anti-globalization movement that was born in the late 1990s. The anti-war movement of the first half of the 2000s, social forums, summit protests, the movement of the squares that emerged from the anger created by the 2008 global economic crisis, and the Arab uprisings from 2011 all influenced our political biographies. This common generational consciousness was one of the factors that facilitated the understanding of the migrant struggle as being a part of the anti-capitalist struggle. In contrast to the traditional lines within the radical left that I previously pointed to, we conceived changing dynamics of migration on both a national and global scale in their implicit relation to the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Especially by being familiar with the migrant struggle in Europe, we had ideological and political tendencies that allowed us to see the migrant struggle as not only an issue of discrimination but as a zone of conflict inherent to the daily functioning of capitalism (Genç 2011). Moreover, such an inclination has allowed us to go beyond organizational and political limits of NGO-based migration work. Many of us, having being involved in such organizations that had proliferated in the 2000s parallel to Turkey-EU negotiations, had progressively become conscious of the fact that many of the NGOs would perform a kind of intermediary role between the Turkish state or international institutions and migrants.

A Dual Strategic Direction

In retrospect, it can be said that from the fall of 2009 until the Gezi Resistance in May of 2013 (when the regular meetings of the MSN had ended) the MSN acted along two principal aims.

Migration as a Political Terrain of Struggle

The first of the main tasks facing us was to make migration a topic of public discussion. In fact, migration — up until the arrival of Syrian refugees that I discuss below in detail — was not something discussed beyond certain professional spaces. If migration was to be constructed as a political terrain of struggle, such an intervention was crucial in a society where racism, xenophobia, and discrimination were part and parcel of the dominant political and social culture, and where these perspectives went unchallenged also among those in the leftist opposition.

This is the context that the first MSN campaign, which started in February 2010 and continued until the summer months, came to light. The campaign, centered around detention centers, aimed to expose the arbitrary security practices targeting migrants and to make the problems faced by migrants with the changing migration management visible to a wider public. During this period, and especially when looking at the events taking place in front of the Kumkapı detention center[1] or in interviews given to the press, we see that the discourse developed by the MSN emphasized the unacceptability of state intervention against people's movements.

It is clear that this attitude leans on a normative proposition. At the center of this discourse, as summarized by the »No Borders« motto, is the demand to abolish all borders forever and to open the way for the transnational movement of migrants without conditions. As a matter of fact, the reactions to two events that took place during this period carry the traces of this line of thinking.

The first occurred during the period when our ›guesthouse‹ campaign had just begun. On March 16, 2010, as a response to the legislatures of some European states beginning to discuss resolutions concerning the Armenian Genocide, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that tens of thousands of undocumented Armenian workers in Turkey could be deported. The statement said that the presence of non-citizen Armenians was »being managed« but could be put to an end if deemed necessary (Alkan 2010). This statement, which was a clear indication that migrant populations could

1 | Ironically, until recently, detention centers were described as ›guesthouses‹ (*misafirhane*) by the Turkish state institutions.

be used as ›pawns‹ within the complicated dynamics of international politics, did lead to, though limited, rejection among the public.

A much clearer sign that migrants were being used as ›pawns‹ in international politics emerged during the last months of 2010. A bargaining point since the beginning of discussions concerning Turkey's full membership to the EU, the Readmission Agreement, requiring the return back to Turkey of migrants caught in EU countries and who were shown to have entered from there, was back in the spotlight. However, the agreement was being discussed in the mainstream media in terms of the visa exemptions that would be provided to Turkish citizens. Following this, the MSN started a petition campaign:

> »We believe that everyone has the right to free movement and the freedom to live where they want and that nobody can be detained for exercising these rights and freedoms or be held in a constant state of deportation. Regardless of whether or not we will benefit from the benefits presented, we are against this discriminatory practice and say ›No to the visa bribe!‹«

Yet, I must emphasize that the normative claim shaping this statement was overly abstract and was felt as a well-intentioned fantasy in the face of the prevalent acceptance of the immutability of borders. Because of this, although our intervention gained visibility within certain leftist opposition spaces, it was mostly seen as a principled *moral* stance. From the point of how the discourse was perceived, what was able to in part remedy the tension between the political and the ethical space was a case that we had been actively following, that of Festus Okey. An undocumented Nigerian migrant, Okey was killed by a police officer at a police station in Beyoğlu in 2007. Even though it was clear that Okey was killed while being detained, the judicial process after the incident showed yet again that impunity is the norm when it comes to police violence.

In order to show that when it came to police violence, the mentality controlling the security and judicial bureaucracies became even darker for migrants, we launched an extensive series of events. This campaign not only allowed the case of Okey to become a solemn symbol of the state violence migrants feel, but also allowed the discourse of the MSN to become more concrete and its practice more encompassing. Maybe for the first time the presence of migrants living in Turkey, their problems and demands, were recognized to a degree by a larger segment of the public. The campaign assumed a certain visibility, even in mainstream media outlets. Moreover, the case has caused a symbolic shift within the broader leftist space in terms of political perception of migrants. While in the 2000s migrants' problems were mostly

ignored or regarded at best as a matter of legal technicality to be dealt with by experts or NGOs specialized in the field, the campaign that brought together a wide array of actors on the left — e.g. political parties and initiatives, professional organizations, university circles, teacher unions, and grassroots groups — opened up a space to tackle international migration as a political issue. In short, the campaign expanded the boundaries of the migrant struggle in Turkey to a certain extent, and demonstrated what solidarity movements in this sphere could accomplish.

Migrants and Self-Organization

Throughout the MSN's campaigns, we mostly used classical methods of social movements, such as press releases, street action, interviews, visits to institutions, radio programs, breakfast meetings, solidarity nights, film screenings, and panels. But such an orientation leads to dead ends. First of all, even if these methods create sensitivity and awareness among the public, in many cases it is unable to reach the subjects of the struggle — the migrants themselves. The structural constraints, which determine the conditions of daily life for migrants, prevent such calls (aimed at citizens) from reaching them. Since the public space is defined by a set of power relations, those who are at the edges of these relationships are structurally prevented from moving towards the center. Secondly, an effort to raise awareness among non-migrants always carries the risk of recreating the relationship of domination between migrants and citizens. Even in moments where much more oppressive reactions such as xenophobia, discrimination, and racism are overcome, due to the tendencies of the already present and powerful political cultures, the relationship between migrant and citizen is often formed on the basis of charity. Today, the presence of Syrian refugees has made it extremely clear that in situations where a position of solidarity is not able to displace one of charity, the migrant will be dependent on the ›grace, patience, and tolerance‹ of the citizen.

We were aware of these limitations from the onset. This is why we saw the creation of tools for the self-organization of migrants as an essential part of constructing a solidarity movement. We tried to contact the small number of migrant associations or groups without official status, such as the Union of Young Migrants in Turkey (UJRT), an initiative started by a group of Congolese and Afghan youngsters who organized at a center for unaccompanied minor refugees. In addition, in order for the voices of migrants to reach those outside of their community in an unmediated manner, we tried to spearhead the creation of communication tools such as newspapers and websites. But such initiatives often ended up incomplete.

As opposed to these first attempts, what became more long-lasting, and is still functioning today, is the MSN Kitchen, which was formed to fill this critical space. Launched in March of 2012, it aimed to create a spatial node that would establish and spread the type of solidarity relation I describe above. What we envisioned was that the presence of a physical space that would be shaped through the participation of migrants and would create connections between disparate migrant groups, as well as with members of the MSN and the residents of the neighborhood. Because of this, even though the neighborhood of Kumkapı — where the migrant population is higher — was initially identified as the best location, the neighborhood of Tarlabaşı-Beyoğlu was ultimately chosen. At that time, Tarlabaşı was a neighborhood where a large number of Sub-Saharan Africans in particular were residing. This population was sharing the same space as the Kurds, who were the principal population in this central neighborhood and who had also arrived as victims of forced migration. On the other hand, another important driver behind this choice in location was the accelerating rate of urban transformation projects in Tarlabaşı. We conceived the Kitchen as both a building of strength, with a social center formed by migrants themselves, as well as a space of interaction where different struggles would interact and have a propagative quality.

The Kitchen was an experiment where the monetary relations of daily life were practically abolished, interpersonal relations were formed on the basis of solidarity, and the voluntary reciprocity between migrants and non-migrants was a central theme. Through free Turkish, Kurdish, and English classes, meetings to discuss working conditions, or consultations with lawyers to provide legal consultations, the aim was for migrants to become the founders and active participants of this experiment. The Kitchen, in terms of its aims, mechanisms, and principles, was a point of inspiration to similar experiences that would arise as part of the Gezi Resistance.

In hindsight, I cannot say that this way in which it was conceived was fully put into action. Even though, through activities such as language courses, the Kitchen has continued past the functional period of the MSN, it has not created a space of interaction for the migrant community of the neighborhood to the degree that had been desired. That the migrant population grew over time with the addition of an extensive population of Syrians did not change the situation for the better either. Here it is possible to mention some of the subjective factors, such as practical/material operational problems, or the slow erosion of the MSN's sustainability. Yet, as related to the discussion above, I must add more »structural« factors, which are harder to overcome, to this picture. Consequently, even though we diligently struggled, we as Kitchen activists were unable to create the tools that would break the way the networks that formed over years operated in the Kurdish neighborhood; these networks

found the activists themselves to be ›foreign,‹ and they excluded migrants, especially those arriving from Africa, keeping them at the periphery. Even more important, the tension between solidarity and charity was also unable to be broken in the experience of the Kitchen. Under conditions where effective and egalitarian social policies were not present to meet the urgent daily needs of migrants, the gap between the expectations of migrants and the solidarity perspective put forth by us continued to widen. In the end, the migrant population of the neighborhood, struggling with overwhelming material conditions and observing how charity networks provided much faster immediate solutions to their everyday problems, found such a discourse of solidarity too abstract.

The resolution of this tension, often discussed through the false dichotomy between micro relationships of support vs. macro political proposals, was a topic of constant discussion for the MSN. This is why, in expanding our communication network, we tried to establish a long-lasting relationship with certain trade sectors we prioritized. Our goal here was to partially provide for the daily needs of migrant groups we were in contact with, while at the same time expand the struggles concerning rights to those particular sectors to include migrants. The solidarity perspective had to break out of an abstract principle, which would ultimately disappoint migrants, and instead had to become reified in ways that would affect their lives. On the other hand, our goal was to refrain from attempting to provide services that should be the purview of state anyway, and instead to emphasize the responsibilities the state had towards migrants. From this double framework, we attempted to create regular relationships of cooperation with individuals in health, law, and education and with unions and professional associations organized in these sectors. But factors, such as the massive scope of the problems faced by migrants as well as the low number of lawyers specializing in international migration, prevented these efforts from continuing past a certain point.

Deadlocks and Syrian Refugees

The viciousness of the political climate following the Gezi Resistance was an important factor in ending how the MSN had functioned up until then. Since many of us were also taking roles in other areas of struggle, the regular meetings, which ensured the continuity of the network, fell by the wayside. But the real factor that brought the end of the MSN experience, was the contradictions within our discourse and practice that were made clear by the structural conditions brought forward by the arrival of Syrian refugees.

Syrian refugees took the period of transformation Turkey had been going through in the 2000s to a new level, both in numbers and in terms of lived experience. The

flow of migrants, which began in April of 2011, reached tens of thousands within months and three million by 2016, not only brought the concept of refugees suddenly into the public eye, but also created new problems that have been insurmountable with the present public policy directions, institutional mechanisms, and physical infrastructure. Under these circumstances, the experiences of those living in refugee camps or in the southern cities, as well as the hundreds of thousands of those who came to Istanbul of course, had to become part of the MSN's agenda. Thus, since January of 2011, our main topics of discussion in the network were access to health care, education, and work for those in the camps and the cities, the meaning and validity of the government's declared »open door« policy, and the legal status of Syrians.

During this phase, we could not construct a thorough discourse allowing for discussions around the problems of Syrian refugees from a perspective of solidarity, and could not create an effective action agenda. The reasons behind this impasse are multilayered. First of all, the character of the political and military developments in Syria, and topics such as the political, ethnic, or religious affiliations of those who were arriving, led to discussion which revealed clear differences within the Turkish left. In resonance with its prevailing inward-looking and anti-internationalist tendencies that I previously touched upon, the overwhelming majority of the radical left — in a similar fashion with the Kemalist/republican mainstream left — regarded the events in Syria as a planned step towards the further destabilization of the Middle East in accordance with an offensive taken by the imperialist powers. Against this backdrop, a second and more important fault line emerged within the MSN. Some of us regarded the initial popular mobilizations in Syria as a moment of the recent Arab uprisings and asked the network to take an open supportive position, while others opposed such a position that they believed would locate the issue of migration within the context of existing broader fault lines and harm the immediate interests of migrants. In other words, the primary line of division within the network was among those that tended to conceive migration as a crucial moment of broader political dynamics and ones that apted for delinking migration from other lines of political contestation. In fact, both parties agreed upon the fact that Syrian refugees had tremendous problems and right-violations in Turkey and that they had to be supported to gain further rights in terms of refugee law. Yet, we could not reach a common understanding regarding the nature of migration as a terrain of political struggle, and this prevented us to take more active stance in our daily interactions with Syrian refugees.

As a result, the inner discussions within the network both created a certain inertia regarding the routine activities of the network and paved way to discontent among the regular activists.

In the face of such a deadlock, the position taken by the MSN, which had held consensual decision-making to be a main principle, was to approach the issue of Syrian refugees outside of these political discussions as much as possible, and to take as the bare minimum a position that would bring to light the hardships faced by migrants in their daily lives. However, this attitude led us to yet another dead end. Above all, the arrival and presence of Syrian refugees made the effort to make their problems and demands visible in that initial phase of the network meaningless. The extent and tragedy of what was transpiring had already created both a positive and negative type of visibility in the public eye. In this new context, we needed to overcome the paternalistic and pragmatic rhetoric of the AKP concerning Syrians. Moreover, we had to take steps to overturn the discourse and positions against migrants that were also highly prevalent in anti-government circles. At that time, the common perception of both the Kemalist/republican parliamentary opposition and the non-parliamentary socialist left to a certain extent was to perceive Syrian refugees as Islamist militants against the Syrian regime and/or a tool to be deployed by the AKP government to change the demographics of some regions in Turkey.

Even if it was impossible to replace the charity mechanisms developed by civil society organizations with strong organizational capacities and close ties to the state, what needed to happen to move forward in order to overcome the paternalism was to put forward a practice which could demonstrate that an empowering solidarity perspective — an immature example of which I discussed above in the case of the Kitchen — was possible and sustainable. Yet, we did not have the material means or networks of affinity to make its central principles of solidarity and self-organization a reality.

To move forward in the second direction of combating anti-refugee sentiments, a solid political discourse had to be formulated which had as much clarity and resiliency as the dominant political discourses surrounding the issue of Syria and Syrians. However, the bare minimum consensus identified to move beyond the deadlock of the MSN was not conducive for such a discourse to arise from. Even further, the normative claim we expressed with the slogans »No borders« or »No one escapes without reason« was not translatable to a detailed and understandable political proposition in a context where borders were being opened by the state for certain interests and expectations. As such, the structural transformation brought about by the arrival of Syrian refugees made the tensions inherent to political and discursive line of the initial phase of the MSN unbearable. In the absence of a revival that allowed us to overcome these contradictions, the MSN experience, at least as we had come to know it, ended.

IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

The type of analysis I have conducted here will only make sense by understanding the opportunities and limits of initiatives that were formed in the aftermath of the MSN. In fact, the completion of the transitional period I have discussed has not only provided the conditions that ended the MSN experience, but has also created other initiatives for creating common lives in solidarity with migrants. Even if the MSN-Istanbul is not as active today as it used to be,[2] there are new initiatives which have appeared — for instance, *Halkların Köprüsü* in Izmir, *Mülteciyim Hemşerim* in Istanbul, *MSN-Ankara* in Ankara, and *Kırkayak* in Gaziantep, among others. Just as the MSN Kitchen is continuing on its path, there are other formations attempting to provide solutions to problems ranging from daily nutrition and clothing needs, to shelter and education of migrants living in the periphery neighborhoods of major cities. The marches launched by the thousands of migrants in the summer of 2015 have led to the birth of new solidarity initiatives.

Turkey today is without a question a country of migration. The presence of millions of migrants has launched dynamics impossible to roll back. New social and political spaces of clashes, some that are apparent already, and some that are only appearing on the horizon, are growing in the midst of these dynamics. Yet, the future is not only open to new clashes but also to new potentials, encounters, and diversifications. While struggling to break free from the grueling circumstances, which have led them to embark on a journey full of unknowns, migrants are also transforming the places of their arrival. Solidarity movements that are able to embrace these clashes, limits, and opportunities will give direction to these transformations.

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2 | There have been various attempts in the last three years to reenergize the MSN-Istanbul, yet they have proved inconclusive in contrast to the initiatives I list here.

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