

Providing a space that refugees call their own

Among the over two million Syrians in Turkey, some 1.9 million Syrian refugees live in urban areas in Turkey. UNHCR and its partners, through their community centres offer a life-line to refugees with the services and counselling provided. In 2015, UNHCR supported two community centres in Istanbul, with the contributions received from all donors, including the Governments of Denmark and Canada.



The IMC/ASAM community centre, supported by UNHCR in Istanbul.
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ISTANBUL, Turkey. 13 November (UNHCR): It's down a winding street in the Beyoglu area of Istanbul, with European-style mansions and cobbled pavements. In this maze of old-world charm, is the community centre for Syrian refugees run by the International Medical Corps (IMC) and the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM), supported by UNHCR. A narrow building, whose four floors offer primary health counselling including referrals to hospitals, family planning, pre-natal counselling; training for women to improve their health—this is done with the Family Planning Foundation of Turkey and is 13 week program; social and legal counselling that helps refugees learn about the national refugee and asylum framework; basic Turkish language courses, English courses, art classes for children and sewing classes for women.

Selwa (37), is alone in Istanbul with her three boys, the eldest is disabled. Originally from Qamishli in Syria, she lived in

Damascus for five years before the conflict reached their doorstep a year ago, and she fled to Turkey with her sons and her father. “We hid in our home for 20 days, because of

fighting,” she says. “My children couldn’t even walk because of hunger. We could not stay in Syria anymore,” she says sadly recounting their flight.



Selwa, with her youngest son, at the Centre. ©UNHCR/N.Bose

Now a volunteer at the IMC/ASAM centre, Selwa is one of the women who has been trained in the women’s health. She has a certificate that says that she is trained in breast feeding, children’s health and reproductive health. “We are given a lot of information about general health and pregnancy,” she says. “We are trained on how to check for breast cancer, we counsel women on how to prevent pregnancies including the use of contraceptives, their side effects, if any.”

Gelan (23) is also originally from Damascus and came with her husband and daughter, two years ago to Istanbul, crossing in Qamishli. Her experience was a harrowing one: “I was five months pregnant. They told us to follow the train

tracks. I was with my daughter and I fell down. I lost my baby,” she says close to tears. “We had a Syrian guide and I sold my ring to make the journey and took the bus from Mardin to Istanbul.” She’s grateful

to the centre for many of the services it offers. “People told us about this centre. They helped me with clothes, cleaning items, a voucher card for food and basic items. They helped me to fill the papers for a Turkish ID card and explained about how to register, go to a hospital, how to admit my daughter to a school. They told me about psycho-social support, and of the classes they offer. They were the only source of information for me in Istanbul.”

Like Selwa, she’s making a new life for herself. She’s finished the first three months of the Turkish language class, and her husband has a job as a cleaner. The family is beginning to live, again. Her daughter now five years old, has started going to school. “My Turkish is not perfect,” Gelan says with a smile. “But I can communicate in hospitals and can take local transport. When I arrived, I just used to stare.”



Mohammad meeting with Eda, the health counselor at the centre. ©UNHCR/N.Bose

Mohammad (46) was at the centre, meeting the health counsellor. His wife was unwell and he was collecting medicine for her. Originally from Damascus, he left a year ago with grown-up sons, a young daughter and his wife. “I don’t want my sons to be dragged into the war,” he says. “I came to save them.” He looks at Eda, the young health counsellor at the centre and says with a smile in his eye, “They do their best to help us, here. They care about us and call to ask about our situation. They help us with medicines and appointments in hospitals.”

There are thousands of Syrian refugees like Mohammad, Selwa and Gelan that this community centre has helped. UNHCR is able to support such centres through generous funding from various donors including the Governments of Denmark and Canada. UNHCR Turkey has received over USD 3.3 million from the Government of Denmark for both Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Turkey and over USD 1.7m from the Government of Canada for Syrian refugees in Turkey. There are a total of nine such community centres currently funded by UNHCR and its donors in Turkey.



A counseling session in progress at the HRDF community centre, supported by UNHCR in Istanbul. ©UNHCR/N.Bose

Across town, in Esenler, there is another community centre run by the Human Rights Development Foundation (HRDF), supported by UNHCR. This is a new centre, not even a year old. Esenler is an area where a lot of Syrian refugees – estimated to be about 20,000---live. The centre offers psycho-social and legal support, art workshops for children and a space for them to play, seminars on health and legal issues, Turkish language classes and handicraft/skills building classes, for men and women. But of all it offers, most popular are the women’s solidarity groups, which give women a space to call their own. They come, they share, they talk and take strength and learn from each other. The groups have helped empower women like Feryil and Falak and meet twice a week.

“It was a light I wanted to catch,” says Feryil (49) simply. She is Yezidi, a minority group in Syria and Iraq. “In the group, I shared my pain, my suffering. We feel safe to talk here, we are relaxed and we even drink coffee together.” She speaks fluent English and said she studied English literature in Syria. “I used to be a teacher in Aleppo. Now I am doing manual work, cutting cloth at a shop.” But she is grateful to be alive. “A bomb fell on our house, one of my sons was injured. We crossed at the Bab el Salam border, ran on the road for two hours, through the mud. My son fainted. It was a nightmare,” she says. She’s also learning Turkish at the centre and appreciates that it provides a safe space for her and her children.



Falak, recounting her tale. ©UNHCR/N.Bose

“I lost the most important things in my life: my husband, my hopes for the future,” says Falak (45). “I became psychologically depressed and needed help when I came to Istanbul.” Well educated with degrees in Anthropology and Library Sciences, Falak is originally from Damascus. She used to work in an NGO there and does the same here. She is also part of the women’s solidarity group at the Esenler Community Centre in Istanbul. “The staff is very kind. They told me that I had a lot to share because of my education and I am much better now.” From being someone who needed the group to help her battle her fears, Falak is now someone who helps other women in the group. “All women should be self-reliant,” she says. “In the group, I support other women and I try and help them culturally. I am learning as well from them, but I have also given them a lot of help and advice.”

Given that over 85 percent of Syrian refugees live in urban areas, community centres like these offer a new lease of life to thousands of refugees. They work in tandem with what the Government of Turkey so generously offers: primary health care, education, and a right to stay in this country, protected and safe. UNHCR remains grateful to all its donors, and in this case, to the governments of Denmark and Canada, for allowing part of their funds, to support these community centres. The

centres are a lifeline to a people so desperately in need.

“I always go to them when I have a problem,” says Gelan. “For anything. My I.D card, a health issue and I go a lot because I feel welcome. I tell other Syrian refugees about the IMC/ ASAM centre, so that they too, can be helped through their services.”

And it’s the same praise for the HRDF run centre. “They treat us so well here,” says Feryil. “Better than my own country. I feel Turkey is safe and as a Yezidi, I can never go back.”

By: *Nayana Bose, in Istanbul*

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