

On the situation of Afghan refugees in Turkey: A report.

October the 25th, 2014

Three years ago, Javid (Afghan citizen) and his family moved to Turkey after having lived in Iran for about two decades. In June 2014 we met Javid in Konya and talked with him about the difficult situation of Afghan refugees in Turkey and about their protest against the UNHCR. The UN refugee relief organisation for Turkey is based in Ankara and is responsible for asylum applications within Turkey, which does not have its own system to deal with asylum issues. For unknown reasons, however, the UNHCR has been completely refusing to handle the asylum applications of Afghans. That is why parts of the Afghan community living in Turkey began to protest against the UNHCR in summer 2014.

The following text solely consists of Javid's literal statements. For reasons of clarity and comprehensibility we just modified the sequence of his statements.

Recent developments in Afghanistan and Iran: Why so many Afghans are fleeing

There were some laws facing the living conditions in Iran (...). When the new president came, Mr. Ahmadinedschad, he said, that after this year he will give money to all members of the Iranian citizenship. (...) But for that, you have to pay more for electricity, gas, oil and petrol and so on (...). Prices will increase and therefore the government gives money. But there was no change for Afghans – no salary, nothing, they just had what they earned for their hard work. So, they cannot suffer the situation, because the government doesn't pay to the Afghans.

Also, every year we had to pay money to the government for changing our cards. We had our ID-cards for one year and after one year we had to change them and pay a lot of money to the government. So, most of the Afghans said, we cannot stay here any more, because it's too hard. We're working, working, working, but it's not enough for us. (...) Thus, many Afghans went back to Afghanistan, some went somewhere else. I think this started in 2011 (...).

And in 2014 another group left Afghanistan, because the NATO and the US-military went out of Afghanistan. Then they thought, they couldn't live there any more – they were afraid of the Taliban. These are the reasons why so many people from Afghanistan came to Europe, Turkey, Australia, Malaysia.

Arrival in Turkey and the begin of the protest

Then my family and me arrived in Turkey. We had some informations about living in Turkey. We knew that living in Turkey is very hard, we'd have to work a lot. But it was our plan to go to Europe, e.g. to Germany or to Scandinavia, because they need refugees. They will give some facilities for refugees to set up a new life. But when we arrived in Turkey, we noticed, that crossing the border illegally is not that easy. It's very costly and very dangerous (...).

That's why we stayed in Turkey and registered at the UNHCR in Ankara. We thought it will take a long time, but due to the law UNHCR will finally send us to third countries. It's save, but it will take time. That's what we thought. But after two years we noticed, that our choice was not good. UNHCR doesn't care about Afghans. They don't consider Afghan cases – we can see Iranians, Iraqians, Syrians passing by and leaving the country, but not Afghans. That was the reason of our protest in Ankara. For us, the conditions are important, not the place. But the conditions are hard in Turkey. We don't have a choice, that's why we're protesting (...).

At the beginning of the protest just a few people participated. But after a while more and more people joined and after 15 days the police came to close the street and arrest the protesters. First, they brought us to the *yabancı subesi* [engl.: foreigner's registration office] in Ankara. Then we had to sign a paper and they sent us back to different cities in Turkey. But they didn't sent all of us to the cities we ought to be. For example: I live in Konya, but they brought me to Gaziantep. I don't know why. I think, it is just stupid and badly organised. They brought us to a bus and then brought us to any city. The police does not know what to do (...).

We also have to go to a police office every week and give our fingerprints. If you don't go there, the police can fine you. This was also a problem during our protest, because some of us lived far away from Ankara. They could not go to their cities just to give their fingerprints (...).

And if you want to go to another city, you have to ask the police. If they allow you to go, they give you a paper for a special period, within which you are allowed to travel (...). The situation depends on the city. For example in Konya the police is kind. In Yumuşane it was harder, it depends on the police. In some cities the police is really hard and they do not allow you anything. But here for example the police told us: 'if you see us coming and you are working illegally, just go!'

It is our right to protest. And actually we are not protesting against Turkey, but against the UNHCR. So we continue our protest, because (...) the UNHCR discriminates against us, but we're humans. According to UNHCR law, every human has to be treated ecqually, but that's not what we see here in Turkey. Although we were protesting in front of the UNHCR building in Ankara and tried to get in contact with the officals by phone calls, mails, letters, we didn't get any response of the UNHCR. If they don't change their policy, we'll go back to Ankara one month later and start a new wave of protests (...). Nobody cares about Afghans – not Turkey, not the UNHCR, not Europe. Syria is the new topic now, but nobody cares about people from Afghanistan – and it is getting more and more usual for us, we get used to it (...).

Personally, I would like to stay in Turkey, because it is closer to my country, to Afghanistan. But the conditions of living are not acceptable. They have to change them. How can we live here?! Without money, without work, without anything? For one year I'm trying to study, because I want to continue my education. But it is just impossible. I went to the university and told them, that I want to continue my studies. But I just had a photocopy of my diploma. They didn't accept it, so I wrote to my Highschool to get a new diploma, which I finally did get. But still they don't accept it. They just don't want us to study.

„Human traffickers“

(...) We can just move to Europe illegally by paying a lot of money to human traffickers. For

example to go from Turkey to Italy illegally, you have to pay 5000 Dollars for each person and it takes about 4 or 5 days. For going to Greece it's between 2000 and 3000 Dollars per person. If you want to go to US or to Canada, you have to pay about 18.000 Dollars – that's what a human trafficker told us (...). It is easy to get in contact with human traffickers. In Istanbul it is really easy to find them. Or I can call one of my friends and one of them will have a phone number, that's for sure (...).

First you have to give them all the money. Then they give you the receipt. When you don't arrive at the place you wanted to go, you can get your money back (if you still have the receipt). But some of them just take the money and leave. One of my friends payed the money to go to Greece. Their group didn't pass the border to Greece, but the human trafficker told them, that they are in a Greek village and left the group. Then they noticed that they were still in Turkey. This happens a lot. Most of the people crossing illegally are from Afghanistan and now from Syria (...).

In Iran we lived together with my relatives. Now some of my relatives went to Europe – to the Netherlands, to Sweden, to Germany. Now they're living there without any problems. They crossed the border illegally by using human traffickers some years ago. It was easier that time and much cheaper. Most of the Afghans, who have money, try to go to Europe illegally. There is no other way but taking the risk. But those who don't have money, have to stay in Turkey.

On the consequences of the civil war in Syria for Afghan refugees

When we came to Turkey there were some people who helped us, e.g they gave us home facilities – in Yumushane (where we arrived) and also in Konya, where we're living now. There were some organizations, which helped us. But they don't help us any more (...), because now there are so many people from Syria or Iraq – now their help focuses on them. I went to them and talked about the situation of Afghan people and that they also need help, because they as well can't just go back now. But they don't accepted that, because the media does not report on Afghanistan, just on Syria. In the news you see people fighting, you see the war. The situation in Afghanistan is also bad, but after 10-15 years it became usual for the world. (...) Really, at the moment everyone, including NGOs, is helping people from Syria. Their work is focusing on them. For Afghans it is really hard. I heard a lot about Afghans who committed suicide. Also a lot of Afghans are mentally ill. In Iran you can speak Farsi, so you have a lot of friends. But in Turkey, you do not have. And you do not have the same rights like other refugees. You can see people who just came to Turkey, registered at the UNHCR and after a few months or years they can leave Turkey. But not Afghans. They have to stay in Turkey and have no hope, no perspective, nothing (...).

Black labour and economic exploitation

We don't have a passport, so we can not even go back to Afghanistan. This was a problem in Iran and it's the same problem in Turkey now. During the 20 years we've been living in Iran, we were just accepted as refugees – without the right to work! At the same time, we were not able to go back to Afghanistan, because we had no passport (...).

Actually you can say, that the Afghans made the Iran. After the war between Iran and Iraq a lot of people from Afghanistan went to Iran to work in the building sector (and still a lot of Afghans are working in Iran in this sector illegally). Turkey is doing the same. They send the Afghans to the poor regions, i.e. to underdeveloped cities. The Afghans have no working permit, thus they have to work illegally (...). This is a political decision. Human work is like money for the government. The Turkish government knows that Afghans are working illegally, but they do not care, they want it this way. Same in Iran. In Iran, they do not allow the people to go to Turkey, to other countries, to Afghanistan or to the UNHCR, because they want Afghans to work! Of course in Iran, Afghans have to work harder than Iranians, because the Afghans really depend on the money (...).

When you work illegally you can not go to the police if you are not paid. You have no right to work, so you can't report to the police. It is happening a lot that people do not get their money. So we try to get to know the employer and find out whether he is a good person or not. Most of the refugees in Turkey are working in the textile industry doing jobs nobody wants to do (...).

My brother and my cousin are working every day. If they wouldn't, we could not pay the rent. Every month we pay 350 TL for this house – including water, electricity etc. (...) Additionally we are working all together here in our flat. My brother brings boxes from a shoe factory containing parts of shoes. We fix the parts together and send the shoes back to the factory. It is really few money for a lot of work, but there is no other way to earn money. My sister and my mother can do this job at home. Three persons can earn 20 or 30 TL per day by doing so.

The conversation was conducted by Katharina Kestler and Philipp Brehm (borderline-europe)

Some days ago we received the following E-Mail from Javid:

After our protest UNHCR start considering Afghan refugees cases, but not all of them, they choose some cases and call them for interview.

Although there is something changes but it's not enough because suspension is going on and not stopped.

For refugees of other nations everything is usual but not for afghans. in the last meeting between afghan representative and the office they said we just can consider 5% Of afghan cases which is not acceptable for us.

Due to this condition 5 representative of afghan refugees will go to ankara to discuss with the UNHCR about the issue.

Regards

Javid