Syrian Refugees Forced to Share Housing in Turkey

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Across the border in Turkey, increasing demand and local resentment are making accommodation hard to find.

High rents and difficulties in finding work mean that large numbers of Syrian refugees who have fled to Turkey are sharing cramped accommodation, sometimes more than five to a room.

Demand for housing has boomed in Turkish border towns since Syrian refugees began arriving, pushing up rents. As of September 2014, the United Nations’ refugee agency estimated that 1.6 million Syrians had crossed into Turkey.

More than 200,000 are housed in 22 camps along the frontier, but the majority live dispersed in Turkish border towns and provinces, particularly Gaziantep, Sanliurfa and Antakia.

For Syrian refugees living in Turkey, the cost of renting a home varies widely, from around 200 to 700 US dollars a month, depending on the size and location of the property and the amenities on offer.

Because of the high costs, refugees have sought to reduce rents by living communally. A report published by Amnesty International in November said some refugees were being forced to live in unsanitary or dangerous conditions.

The owner of a typical communal house charges ten lira a night (around four dollars), or else a flat rate of around 50 lira per week or 150 lira a month. That covers all expenses and bills, and houses normally have internet, a communal kitchen, washing machine, and an iron.

Nader, 29, lives in a two-storey communal house in Sanliurfa. Several different families live on the ground floor while the second floor is rented to 15 young men, who share three rooms. Nader came to Turkey from Raqqa seven months ago after Islamic State took control of the city.

“I rented a house with a group of friends, but we were kicked out after a while,” Nader said. “I wasn’t able to find another place due to the high rents, and because many Turks refuse to rent to young Syrians. I’m comfortable here and it’s more economical for me.”

While Turkey has been praised for taking in so many refugees from Syria, the spiralling numbers have put pressure on businesses and the lives of locals.

Many landlords are now reluctant to rent properties to Syrians. Some have accused tenants of stealing while others have discovered that more people are sharing a room than agreed.

About two months ago, Khaled, 31, set up a shared house in Sanliurfa. He needed a way to earn a living and wanted to help young people who were being refused housing by most of the local real estate offices.

After hearing landlords say “Suriyeli yok” (“no Syrians”) so many times, Khaled concluded that communal housing was the best solution.

“It’s as if we have come to beg [for somewhere to live], so I decided to start a communal housing project,” Khaled told IWPR. “I’m not the only one doing this. There are now more than ten houses like this [in Sanliurfa]. Many young men have fled the army reserves, and some of them ran away after the Islamic State entered their areas. This is apart from those who left to find work. All these people need accommodation.”

After defecting from the Syrian army, Saleh, 31, first went to live in the Syrian city of Deir al-Zor, where he worked in an internet cafe and a mobile phone shop. However after Islamic State forces entered the city, the security situation deteriorated further and he decided to head north to the town of Qamishli, before eventually crossing into Turkey.

He hoped he would find work there to support himself and pay for his parents to join him from Syria. But he has been unable to find a job so far. Nor does he not have enough money to rent an apartment.

As a result, Saleh has been sharing a room with other refugees for the last three months. Among them is Mohammad, 22, who left the Aleppo suburbs for Turkey in a bid to find work and save up enough to emigrate to Europe illegally.
However, he too has been unable to find a job and he is still living off the money he borrowed from his family. For Mohammad, shared housing offers a cheap and uncomfortable solution – and he hopes a temporary one.

“I will bear this situation until I can find work,” he said. “I won’t spend money until I achieve my goal.”

Amer, 23, is a law student who left his parents in the city of al-Hasakah in Syria’s northeast and traveled to Sanliurfa in search of work. He dislikes communal living and believes it is not worth the money he saves.

For Amer, one of the downsides is that shared housing brings together young Syrians who are divided on issues relating to the conflict. Heated debates between housemates sometimes turn into fights.

“We live with people who don’t share our politics or beliefs, or even our culture and morals,” he said.

Amer is also afraid that cramped living conditions can foster infectious diseases – and few people can afford medical treatment.

“Most of us don’t have the money to buy bread, so what will happen if we fall ill and need medicine?” he asked.

Amer found a job with a furniture removal company but he is looking for other work as his slight frame cannot cope with the physical demands of this one.

Saad, 25, used to live in a shared house but he left it to join his parents when they arrived from Damascus.

Like Amer, he disliked the tense discussions between roommates that would sometimes degenerate into fights. Saad accused the house owners of taking advantage of their lodgers and providing dismal living conditions. Despite this, he had no choice but to remain.

Ayman, 27, has got his own home, thanks to the owner of the restaurant where he works, who got a friend to rent him a place.

“I left the communal house immediately,” Ayman said. “I have allowed four friends to live with me, provided they split the rent and the expenses and keep the house clean. Thank God, our situation is now much better than it used to be.”

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