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Queer (Im)mobilities and the 'Refugee Crisis': Examining Stakeholder Responses to Sexual Minority Refugees in Turkey

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Abstract:
This article explores the ways in which different organisations in Turkey are responding to and engaging with sexual minority refugees displaced as part of the 'Refugee Crisis'. It does so by examining the discursive representations of queer or LGBTQ refugees, and their impact on both local and international responses to sexual minority displacement in Turkey. In so doing, this article argues that whilst attempts to mainstream sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) persecution into international and state-level protection strategies is welcome, the Turkish example shows more research is needed lest this engagement results in the furthering of exclusionary practices that may in fact make it more difficult to protect the most vulnerable of queer peoples. In light of this assessment, this article notes the significant and under-researched ways in which local organisations in Turkey are navigating these problems within their sexual minority refugee protection programmes, in turn presenting the conceptual tools that may enable international actors to respond to and engage with sexual minority refugees in more effective ways.

Keywords:
Sexuality, sexual minorities, displacement, Turkey, LGBTQ

Introduction:
Sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) related asylum claims have only recently been mainstreamed into refugee status determination (RSD) processes, yet despite its relative novelty, LGBTQ asylum has become a significantly conspicuous route to safety for many fleeing SOGI related persecution. This is especially true given the particular context of the 'Refugee Crisis', which has seen an increased interest in LGBTQ asylum – at state, media and organisational levels – in light of the heightened persecution of queer peoples by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Despite this, there is a paucity of research into sexual minority asylum[1], and the numerous responses that have emerged since 2011 designed to protect queer peoples displaced from Syria (and the region more generally).

In light of this situation, this article explores the ways in which different organisations in Turkey are responding to and engaging with sexual minority refugees displaced as part of the 'Refugee Crisis'. It does so by examining the discursive representations of queer or LGBTQ refugees evidenced by previous research, and their impact on both local and international responses to sexual minority displacement in Turkey. Data was gathered through a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with practitioners, activists and humanitarian actors over the summer of 2016. This data was also complimented by an extensive analysis of secondary literature, including media reports and organisational outputs, including web-based literature and documents. Overall, this article's main aim is to open up a critical discussion relating to sexual minority refugee protection, rather than to offer any concrete recommendations or solutions vis-à-vis policy and practice. However, conclusions in this direction are extremely necessary, hence the need for further research.

The 'Refugee Crisis': A Case of Diverging Protection Regimes?

Before continuing, it is important to briefly explain the ways in which this author has found it useful to think about sexual minority asylum through the lens of the 'Refugee Crisis'. Since 2011, almost 3.1 million refugees have arrived in Turkey in search of international protection. The unprecedented challenges involved in responding to such an influx, both on the part of local stakeholders and international organisations, have been enormous. One notable consequence of this situation can be seen in the growing tensions that exist between the universalist framework of human rights typically employed by international actors on the one hand, and the more particularist priorities of local politics, which configure rights in relation to non-universal identity markers such as nationality, ethnicity and, crucially for this article, sexuality.

Consequently, securing recognition within the 'Refugee Crisis' depends on the refugee's ability to position themselves in relation to these diverging regimes. This challenge becomes all the more difficult for sexual minority refugees, whose rights are often not recognised in, and even threatened by, different asylum contexts, especially when homophobic opinions inform governmental and societal attitudes.

This more particular, local-level issue has been simultaneously compounded by international organisations, stakeholders and practitioners, who tend to frame their arguments around a set of strong cosmopolitan principles such as universal human rights and free movement (Miller 2016). When such a stance encompasses sexual minority rights, it often does so through the use of 'LGBT rights identities' (Altman and Symons 2016), a position that has been taken up with a growing degree of urgency in light of the heightened persecution of sexual minority refugees from the region. In the context of the 'Refugee Crisis', this approach has arguably worked to underscore the assertion of a more particularist homophobic counter-discourse, particularly in Turkey, whose President Erdoğan criticised the EU in May 2016 for caring more about homosexuals than Syrian women and children, adding: "the West possesses a mind-set remnant of slavery and colonialism" (cited in The Guardian 2016b). In this way, the approach taken by international actors in response to the 'Refugee Crisis' may in fact be compounding the persecution faced by sexual minority refugees more generally, given the still controversial nature of sexual minority *rights* in many parts of the world, a point that will be more fully considered throughout this article.

LGBT Asylum and Queer (Im)mobilities

According to queer theorists, the migration of sexual minorities tends to contest the bounds of nationality, gender and citizenship in complex and contradictory ways (Luibhéid and Cantú 2005), acting as a 'porous frontier' (Raboin *Forthcoming*) whereby recognition in the new country is determined by the subversion of normative frameworks on the part of the queer subject. However, in the context of asylum, the challenges of securing recognition, and thus protection, largely deny this degree of subversion, configuring the identities of queer peoples into easily deployable tropes that appear comprehensible in the eyes of legal experts (Giametta 2014). One such example of this can be found in UNHCR's Guidelines on International Protection No. 9, which mainstream the persecution of sexual minorities into refugee status determination (RSD) processes using the framework of LGBT rights (2012). As a result, the few states that recognise LGBT persecution in their RSD processes draw heavily on what is an increasingly normative understanding of sexual minority lives, recognising the claims of queer asylum seekers only when they appear 'credible' in line with LGBT rights discourses

(Murray 2014). This test of 'credibility' is extremely problematic, for it largely depends on a number of normative assumptions, both of sexuality and gender, that limit the space for contestation typically associated with queer migrations.

Significantly, these assumptions are situated in relation to the language of secular modernity that acts as an 'incitement to discourse' (Massad 2008: 174), limiting the space for queer subjectivity, replacing this instead with the construction of 'sexual rights based subjects' (Rao 2010: 176). As a result, asylum policies that engage in the language of LGBT rights seek to 'empower non-Western sexual minorities to express putatively universal sexual longings' (*Ibid*.: 182) in such a way that indirectly obliterates non-Western sexual subjectivity. Moreover, this outcome is necessarily preconfigured by the 'positional superiority' (Nader 1989) of Western rights discourses, that - in the context of LGBT asylum claims - assumes queer refugees are, by necessity, 'fleeing an oppressive, patriarchal and heteronormative culture/religion, to a liberal, gender-equal and 'gay friendly' society' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a).

The problem here is that, as a result of these powerful assumptions, LGBT asylum policies are easily worked into what Duggan has termed 'homonormative' discourses (2003). In contrast to the subversive potential of queer politics, which seeks to challenge and contest dominant heteronormative assumptions of citizenship, gender and sexuality, 'homonormativity [...] upholds and sustains them' (*Ibid*.: 50). For example, homosexuality is often understood to be a 'constitutive epistemological regime for modernity' by NGOs and states (Hoad 2000: 134), leading to the production of predictable narratives that homogenise and mobilise queer identities in straightforward ways. Criticisms of asylum 'rescue narratives' (Rao 2010; Hoad 2000) are especially relevant here for they demonstrate how Western humanitarian interventions, designed to protect queer peoples, are often informed by 'Orientalist' instincts that set out to 'save brown gay men from other brown men' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a). More specifically, such critiques highlight the extent to which LGBT asylum narratives are simplified by 'homonormative' (Raboin *Forthcoming*) and 'liberationist' (Luibhéid and Cantú 2005) frameworks. More precisely, these understand sexuality as the cause of persecution, rather than an effect of discourse (Foucault 1978), creating categories of protection that fail to appreciate the 'inherent instability' of sexual identities (Sedgwick 1990; Spijkerboer 2013).

These frameworks are most noticeable at the international level, where certain humanitarian organisations interested in offering protection to sexual minorities have been criticised for possessing 'colonising fantasies' (Hoad 2000: 150) in their engagement with queer subjects. According to Hoad, organisations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), and International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) have become 'highly interested sites for the production of knowledge about sexual practices and norms outside of Western Europe and the US, and since *much of their work centres around asylum cases*, they have *an interest in making conditions look as bad as possible in other countries* (my emphasis added)' (*Ibid*.: 153). This has implications on the formation of credible LGBT asylum claims, confronting the queer refugee with a largely homonormative framework in which to represent their victimhood. In this sense, Luibhéid – building on Hoad's critique – has argued that such homonormative assumptions appropriate queer subjects, and the materiality of their victimhood, in a way that silences them under the 'moral weight' of 'rescue narratives' (2008: 180). As such, in order to be 'rescued', queer refugees must perform their victimhood in coordination with homonormative assumptions, making certain persecutory elements more visible, to the exclusion of others.

Given this, Giametta (2014) has argued that, in order for queer subjects to be recognised, their victimhood must correspond to the expectations of largely state-centric and homonormative asylum systems. These systems stress the secular nature of LGBT rights, as well as the threats posed to queer peoples on the part of religious and/or 'communitarian' (Rao 2010) societies. As a result, the situatedness of certain homonormative assumptions within a 'secular paradigm' (Giametta 2014: 583) has had significant implications on queer refugee narratives, and the explanations given by different stakeholders to the form and nature of the persecution that they face. On this point, Akram has argued that asylum systems in the West, and their reliance on a secular framework, are reproducing 'Orientalist' discourses, especially in relation to the Middle East, that 'explain every facet' of persecution - in this instance homophobic or patriarchal oppression - 'in light of the Muslim religion' (2000: 8). The challenge for queer peoples fleeing from this part of the world is therefore to perform their victimhood in such a way that clearly plays into this secular narrative, often silencing their faith in order to more plausibly deploy 'well-known stereotypes that demonstrate the dysfunction of their homelands' (Jenicek *et al*. 2009: 647).

In light of the 'Refugee Crisis', which has seen massive displacement occur out of the Middle East, the importance of such discourses in framing responses to and engagements with queer asylum seekers cannot be overlooked. Fortunately, a number of queer and postcolonial theorists have begun to deconstruct the processes that inform representations of queer peoples from the Middle East, drawing in particular on Puar's (2007) concept of homonationalism (Murray 2014; 2015; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a). Homonationalism identifies a 'collusion between homosexuality and [...] nationalism that is generated both by national rhetoric of patriotic inclusion, and by gay, lesbian and queer subjects themselves' (Puar 2007: 67-8). In relation to asylum, homonationalism lends predominantly Western nation-states an ability to legitimise exclusionary and securitised border policies through the language of inclusive human rights discourses, elevating their prestige as tolerant, forward thinking societies in contrast to - and sometimes in conflict with - less tolerant nations.

For example, homonationalist narratives regularly correlate the suffering of queer subjects with the existence of intolerant regimes in 'Other' non-Western parts of the world. In this way, asylum policies that practice 'tolerance' toward LGBT refugees implicitly produce discursive frameworks that work to 'include a few and exclude many' (Murray 2014: 23). This practice is evidenced by the numerous uses of homonationalist rhetoric by political groups such as the Log Cabin Republicans in the USA, who courted conflict with Iraq as a means of 'liberating' Iraqi gays (Rao 2010). The relevance of such critiques in the context of the 'Refugee Crisis', where policies of inclusion and exclusion have been framed around protecting 'ideal' LGBT refugees from the 'barbaric' violence of fundamentalist terrorist groups such as ISIS (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016), offers an important framework for further research.

Importantly, a great deal of Western LGBT rights activism hinges on some of these assumptions, deploying 'rescue narratives' that establish problematic power dynamics between LGBT activists in the West, and those who are campaigning for greater freedoms in the non-West (Rao 2010). Frequently, such well intentioned activism positions local rights groups in frustrating and sometimes disarming positions, whereby the language used by Western activists either does not reflect local understandings of sexual rights and/or practices, or illegitimates their campaigns in the eyes of local communities, who see LGBT rights projects as the product of some sort of 'colonial intervention' (*Ibid*: 174). As such, Altman and Symonds have called for greater reflexivity in the work of

international LGBT rights activists and humanitarians, stating that it is 'not productive [to think we can] impose human rights protections or that we can be radical for other people' (2016: 3). These critiques, though written about extensively in relation to 'third world activism' (Rao 2010), are yet to be applied to the work of local LGBT rights groups responding to displacement in Turkey. As such, they offer a useful framework in which to analyse different stakeholder responses to queer refugees, and the discursive strategies that they deploy.

Finally, the formation of a clearly defined social group 'on the move' depends to some degree on the ability of that social group to 'mobilise' their identities in clearly identifiable ways (Sokefeld 2006). However, as a result of homonationalist discourses, queer identities are more typically mobilised in homonormative ways, especially with regard to LGBT asylum, where different stakeholders are required to present a clearly identifiable 'social group' in order to trigger international protection under the auspices of the 1951 Refugee Convention.[2] This generates a paradox whereby the narrative expectations of secular rights groups relating to sexual identity formation, particularly that of 'coming out', presents queer asylum as a means of 'coming into' sexual liberation (Luibhéid 2008). The implications of this on the queer subject presents challenges to self-narrative, forcing queer refugees to represent themselves 'in relation to socially available and hegemonic discourses' (Anthias 2002: 511), namely homonormativity, and the 'immediate broader contexts in which [their narratives] are a dialectic response' (Sigona 2014: 370), for example, the 'Refugee Crisis', the threat of fundamentalist Islam, and the advent of homonationalist discourses.

Queers on the Frontline: LGBT Asylum and the 'Refugee Crisis'

Building on this theoretical outline, Murray's investigation into the Canadian asylum system highlights how homonationalist discourses are harming queer peoples. He argues that 'LGBT refugees and those who work with them are enmeshed in a system predicated upon highly malleable, historically and socio-politically specific sexual terms and identities that privilege particular gendered, classed and raced interests' (2014: 21). This interpretation corresponds to what Bohmer and Shuman have critiqued as the 'Kafkaesque absurdities' of 'political asylum processes' that make it impossible for many stakeholders to accommodate a more nuanced engagement with the intersections of refugee victimhood (2014: 939). In the socio-political context of the 'Refugee Crisis', this lack of nuance is made clear by the contradictory regimes of hospitality generated by different states, societies, and media outlets. As such, certain stakeholders, politicians and journalists - particularly in Europe and North America - have struggled to respond compassionately to the plight of displaced Syrians in general, yet have found solidarity with the experiences of LGBT Syrian refugees (and Syrian 'women-and-children'[3]) thought to have suffered at the hands of fundamentalist groups like ISIS (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a). By contrast, the persecution faced by queer peoples from other nations, such as Iraq, remains overlooked in the responses of different press organisations, stakeholders, and governments, despite evidence (IGLHRC 2014) that increasing numbers of Iraqi LGBT peoples are being displaced and/or made vulnerable by the sorts of violence exhibited so distinctly in the case of Syria.

As such, the hospitality available to specific queer asylum seekers informs the hostility that is experienced by other forced migrants. This point is informed by the theorising of Jacques Derrida (2000) and has been applied in different contexts of displacement by various authors (Wright 2014; Shuman and Hesford 2014; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a; 2016b), all of whom have linked such processes

to the politics of asylum, and the need for decision makers to identify visible forms of persecution, often to the exclusion of other less obvious vulnerabilities.

This process, that positions refugees in situations of hostility or hospitality, is inevitably linked to the specific political contexts in which the displacement has occurred. For example, the visibility of LGBT victims in the 'post-9/11 world' has frequently been understood in relation to a political concern relating to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in the West. This reasoning is evident in the narratives deployed by a range of different media outlets throughout the Western – and specifically English-speaking – world. For example, Jenicek *et al*. (2009) have examined representations of sexual minority refugees in the Canadian press in order to argue that queer refugee bodies are frequently made visible as 'legitimate victims', placing those who abide by homonormative stereotypes on the frontline of an ideological battle designed to 'uphold the bifurcation between the North/West and the Rest' (*Ibid*.: 637). In the context of the 'Refugee Crisis', where the threat of ISIS is constantly evoked in different reports, this political agenda becomes all the more apparent, goading diverse media outlets, such as *The Daily Mail* in the UK (2015), and *The Washington Post* in the USA (2016), to zone in on ISIS as a primary threat not just to the lives of queer peoples in the Middle East, but also to the values of liberalism at home. In this sense, the persecution experienced by queer peoples caught up in the 'Refugee Crisis' is deployed as part of a discursive homonationalist strategy that conceptualises the availability of sexual freedoms in relation to the 'gradations of barbarity' (Jenicek *et al*. 2009: 647) that have emerged out of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. More specifically, media hypotheses that frame mass displacement from Syria as a threat to security have relied to some extent on the politics of homonationalism, that positions the vulnerability of sexual freedoms as a justification for the more securitised treatments of Muslim refugees in general.

However, these narratives have also presented a number of challenges when it comes to engaging with and protecting queer peoples caught up in the 'Refugee Crisis', not least of all queer women, who remain conspicuously absent from representations of LGBT persecution. For example, media reports that focus on LGBT persecution in Syria and Iraq usually engage in a gendered search for 'absolute victims' (Giametta 2014: 592), identifying mainly men, whose 'effeminate' qualities make them 'gay enough' (Jenicek *et al*.: 637) to satisfy Western stereotypes. In general, this homonormative focus on gay men demonstrates how sexual rights discourses typically 'Other' vulnerable women, confirming what postcolonial feminists have described as the tendency within humanitarian discourses to represent all women from the non-West as non-agentic victim-women (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010; 2014; Akram 2000). Indeed, the complete erasure of queer women from the scene of concern upholds Duggan's (2003) view that homonormativity maintains existing power structures - in this case gender. As such, the failure of homonormative assumptions to acknowledge the intersections of gender and sexuality remain deeply problematic, especially when they are worked into different humanitarian responses – or inscribed in certain representational practices – designed to protect queer refugees.

Furthermore, homonormative understandings of LGBT persecution in the 'Refugee Crisis' are similarly careless in their treatment of faith, which is often represented, in keeping with the secular paradigm of LGBT rights discourses, as incompatible with queer lives. With regard to media representations, an editorial fascination with Islam as the key persecutory threat to queer peoples underscores this, as is evident from *The Daily Mail*'s headline of 11 February 2016, which states: "Surging number of attacks in Germany's migrant centres sees Christians, women and homosexuals forced to flee from Muslim men" (2016). Such headlines no doubt make it more difficult for sexual

minorities to appear 'legitimate' when they themselves are Muslim. Moreover, such observations lack an appreciation of the ways in which gender and faith intersect in the formation of queer identities, relying instead on 'dangerous shortcuts' (Janicek *et al*. 2009) in the representation of LGBT asylum seekers.

Of course, a distinction must be made between the assumptions outlined in different media narratives, and those deployed by asylum officials. Nevertheless, secular discourses have certainly limited the capacity of different practitioners to engage with queer peoples in *truly queer* ways. This outcome is well evidenced by Giametta (2014), who draws a comparison between the asylum processes faced by two different Arab lesbians. The first asylum seeker, Amira, was able to secure international protection relatively quickly because she framed her narrative in terms of escaping a 'homophobic religious culture' (*Ibid*.: 591). By contrast, the second applicant, Sholah, a Muslim Pakistani woman, faced an 11 year process as a result of her reluctance to clearly reject her faith in favour of the secular narratives that frame credible LGBT asylum claims (*Ibid*.: 592). Sholah also failed to comply clearly with the 'pre-understandings' (Berg and Millbank 2009: 195) of sexual development that often informs credibility tests because, as a 32 year-old women who had previously been married, her lesbianism appeared conveniently novel in the eyes of asylum officials: she lacked the *surety* of Amira, who had come into her sexuality at an early age. As such, the tests of credibility applied in asylum cases must be problematised due to their reliance on politically informed assumptions that all too often ignore the complexities inherent in queer lives (LaViolette 2007), especially in the context of the 'Refugee Crisis', where the intersections of faith, gender, secularism and sexuality are all too relevant.

Nevertheless, despite such challenges to protection, UNHCR resettlement policies have emerged as a particularly discernable avenue by which queer refugees are able to access international protection in the context of the 'Refugee Crisis'. For example, in relation to Turkey, resettlement to a third country has allowed a number of LGBT Syrian refugees to be transferred away from continued persecution and welcomed into one of the many UNHCR donor states, such as the USA, Germany, Sweden, and Canada (UNHCR 2016). However, given the complexity of the 'Refugee Crisis', that has placed at least 450,000, or 10% of the total displaced population, in need of resettlement (Amnesty International 2016), it has proven difficult to process resettlement claims with haste. This has placed a number of queer asylum seekers living in Turkey in a situation of increased precariousness, linked both to the lack of physical capacity on the part of international organisations struggling to keep up with mounting casework (Cragnolini 2013), and the conceptual limits of donor states who arguably adopt resettlement schemes in line with homonormative and homonationalist discourses. The implications of this situation on sexual minority refugee protection will be more fully addressed in the discussion of the interview data in the second half of this article, but first it is important to outline the specificities of the Turkish asylum system, which is discussed below.

Contextualising Queer Asylum in Turkey

At a basic level, Turkey is not seen to be a safe place for queer refugees, who are often forced to seek additional sources of legal protection so that they might enjoy their human rights, and find 'physical and psychological peace' (Cragnolini 2013: 98) in their new home. This is because queer refugees typically encounter 'double marginality' (Randazzo 2005: 30) in Turkey, sharing in the precarious situations faced by most asylum seekers, whilst also suffering from 'the general climate of intolerance'

that exists towards LGBTs (Cragnolini 2013: 106). Reports that have focussed on this situation have thus described Turkey as an 'unsafe haven' (ORAM 2009).

A lot of the problems that queer refugees encounter in pursuit of international protection can to some degree be explained by the complexities of the Turkish asylum system itself. The Republic of Turkey is party to both the Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol whilst maintaining the 'geographical limitation', meaning it only processes claims emanating from 'events in Europe'. As such, UNHCR has established, by way of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), responsibility for asylum claims made by applicants *not from Europe*, making it a key complementary protection actor. However, in order to secure international protection, applicants must first register with the recently formed Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), which has been mandated to regulate international protection applicants into satellite cities as part of a long-standing asylum dispersal policy. Once settled into satellite cities, asylum seekers are granted temporary protection status, which provides them with basic rights and access to various services. However, they will not be granted freedom of movement, and must remain in the satellite city whilst they wait for UNHCR to carry out RSD and/or adjudicate on their resettlement application. As such, Turkey's parallel asylum systems have developed 'symptomatic cracks' in the eyes of legal scholars (Zieck 2010), which remain problematic for those seeking protection in the country.

For queer refugees, this system means encountering a number of potentially homophobic scenarios, especially in the satellite cities, where reports of abuse are modest but noteworthy (ORAM 2011). Moreover, insecurities about dealing with numerous bureaucratic institutions, such as the police, often prevents or discourages asylum seekers from expressing their sexual identities in the first place.

In response to these issues, LGBT rights groups, and queer refugees themselves, have begun to fill the gaps left by the Turkish asylum system. This is especially apparent with regard to Iranian queer refugees, who have developed a fairly significant support network in Turkey over the years. Indeed, the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees (IRQR) is an LGBT rights group based in Canada that offers support for queer Iranians both with their UNHCR resettlement applications, and with the general financial needs that emerge as a result of endemic work insecurity. Other LGBT rights organisations that have also provided support to queer asylum seekers caught up in the complexity of the Turkish asylum system include Kaos GL and LambdaIstanbul, with UNHCR's implementing partner ASAM (The Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants) also taking a proactive stance.

However, the 'Refugee Crisis' has made protecting queer refugees increasingly difficult. Indeed, the failures of the Turkish asylum system are revealed in the low numbers of asylum seekers self-identifying as LGBT with the authorities. For example, one report puts the total number of LGBT Syrians at around 700 (Lester-Feder 2015), whilst the real figure is likely higher, especially given the total Syrian population living in Turkey stands at almost 3 million. Moreover, since a number of the reports and articles highlighted above were published (ORAM 2009; 2011), attitudes toward homosexuality in Turkey have certainly deteriorated, with Amnesty International evidencing how 'systematic [...] discrimination by the state authorities' has become more widespread (2011). The attitudes of the ruling Development and Justice Party (AKP) have helped fuel this trend, culminating recently in the homophobic beheading of a gay Syrian refugee who was unable to access protection from a number of organisations as a result of the systematic pressures placed on an already cumbersome asylum system (The Guardian 2016a).

Methods

This research was conducted as part of my MSc Global Migration dissertation at UCL, and as such the data gathered is limited in nature. The data was gathered using five face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and two Skype interviews with representatives from a number of NGOs and stakeholders working in Turkey. I spoke with representatives from UNHCR, ASAM, Kaos GL, LambdaIstanbul, and ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission). I also spoke to an independent Turkish LGBT rights campaigner, and one international freelance journalist who has worked extensively with queer Syrian refugees. All the respondents have been entirely anonymised, in light of the precarious situation many CBOs and practitioners find themselves in following the coup of July 2016.

The interview sample was chosen in order to reflect the key actors in the field. However, they do not represent an exhaustive list. The organisations I had access to were initially contacted by email, which I sent in my capacity as projects assistant at the Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC), an NGO in London that focuses on supporting marginalised communities in the MENA region. A couple of the interviews were arranged as a result of snowballing. The research gathered by semi-structured interviews was contextualised by a number of observations I made, especially in 'gay-friendly' spaces, such as clubs and bars. I also engaged in an analysis of a number of primary sources, such as reports, online news articles, and opinion pieces, in order to more fully understand some of the ways in which the research context was understood and represented by different stakeholders.

Explaining Persecution in Turkey

Many respondents found Turkey to be an 'unsafe' place for queer refugees, drawing on a number of Eurocentric assumptions relating to the impossibility of LGBT lives in Muslim versus secular countries. For example, J. Lester Feder (2015), in his major article for *BuzzFeed*, drew on a number of interviews that he had conducted with 25 different Syrian LGBT refugees. Those whose responses featured in the article (only three) described their experiences as overwhelmingly negative: "I felt finally my problems would be solved but it turned out to be an illusion" said one lesbian called M. In this situation, interviewees were reportedly frustrated, seeking different options that would allow them to leave Turkey for Europe, including crossing the Mediterranean: "It is dangerous, but it's better then me staying here" said 23-year-old Ahmad. This article relies on 'native informants' (Janicek *et al*. 2009) to confirm the 'positional superiority' (Nader 1989) of Europe, which is, in this situation, presented as a haven in contrast to unsafe Turkey.

Significantly, one protection officer who works regularly with LGBT asylum seekers echoed this narrative, arguing that LGBT refugees "came to Turkey with some hope. The Syrian civil war was a chance to leave the country", yet they have been let down: "there is little freedom here". Another respondent also reflected on the "unsafe" nature of Turkey, telling me how DGMM regularly fails to offer basic rights protections to queer refugees and asylum seekers:

> "For Syrians, what is going on in Turkey is totally against international refugee law. [...] Once LGBT register with DGMM in the satellite town, once they get there, there is no help. No help regarding access to basic rights health services, and we are talking about LGBT refugees. They are the most vulnerable group in the refugee society."

Indeed, the sense that Turkey was not a particularly safe place for queer refugees and asylum seekers was evident in the observations I made at an ASAM waiting room, where a bomb detector and an armed guard acted as a constant reminder of the threats involved in securing international protection in the country.

However, when I asked interviewees to explain the reasons why Turkey may be an unsafe place for queer refugees and asylum seekers, their responses were largely more nuanced than the explanations found in numerous media articles that simplify politics in Turkey as a battle between pro-Western secularists and anti-Western Islamists (Huffington Post 2016; BuzzFeed 2016). There was also very little emphasis on Islam as an explanatory factor, in contrast to the homonationalist assumptions underpinning certain asylum systems (Murray 2014; 2015; Giametta 2014) and media representations (Janicek *et al*. 2009; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a) of queer victimhood. Rather, explanations for the state of human rights protections reflected heavily on a number of key domestic debates about Turkish national modernity, corresponding to the historical literature on Turkey that often emphasises the complicated and overlooked relationships that exist between Islam, secularism and Turkish nationalism (Findley 2010).

For example, local rights groups, when asked to pinpoint why Turkey was an unsafe place for queer refugees, focussed on the "conservatism" of "traditional refugee families", whilst one respondent emphasised the "profoundly conservative" nature of Turkish society. Other responses drew on the challenge of governmental authoritarianism, and resisted blaming any specific socio-cultural or religious group for the persecution of queer refugees. For example, one campaigner told me that "we are struggling with this government", whilst another spoke of recent trends as "unethical":

> "It is the government. They are awful. For LGBT rights to progress everywhere in the world, and Turkey is no exception, you have to first have certain other things possible. One is democracy, which we don't have. The second is the rule of law, which we don't have, and the last thing is general acceptance that a civilised society cannot exist without human rights."

In this way, the lack of protection that exists for queer refugees in Turkey was often explained by local rights campaigners in relation to the absence of any clear commitment to fundamental rights in Turkey on the part of the government.

By contrast, UNHCR resisted any open criticism of the Turkish government, which it maintained was meeting the protection needs of LGBT refugees. One protection officer was openly confident about the policies and practices of the Turkish state:

> "Progressively, we have seen [the Turkish authorities] expanding their understanding, and referrals have become more and more appreciative of LGBT needs."

This assessment reflects UNHCR's general obligation to deploy constructive state-centric discourses in its dealings with state partners (Loescher 2001), a consideration that was not reflected in the policies and practices of local LGBT rights groups. By contrast, such groups felt that any growing appreciation of the various protection needs of LGBT refugees on the part of the Turkish state were fundamentally insincere given the absence of any such protections in domestic Turkish law. As such, many of the

LGBT rights activists I spoke to were openly critical of the Turkish state, with one campaigner stating that:

> "I don't trust a word [the government] say[s]. Anybody who believes in this believes in fraud. I do not think I am a fool. Their record speaks for themselves. [...] If people don't know this then they are fools, in the West, in the UN, academics, everybody."

This assessment is notable because it criticises the Turkish state, but, more importantly, it also identifies responsibility on the part of international organisations, either out of naivety or complicity, in contributing to the lack of meaningful protections in Turkey.

As such, the interviews revealed a general frustration with both the Turkish state and the numerous institutionalised Western human rights organisations and international bodies involved in protecting queer refugees. Indeed, developments since the 'Refugee Crisis' were identified as highly relevant, creating a new geopolitical relationship between Turkey and the West that has allowed the Turkish government, according to one activist, to use refugees for "political gain", squeezing concessions out of a "terrified" Europe.

Innovation in Policy and Practice

In this context however, in which the local stakeholders I interviewed registered clear criticisms of both the Turkish government and Western international organisations, many felt optimistic about the protection opportunities that were opening up. "Where there is pressure there is resistance", said one activist, adding: "The LGBT movement is strong and we move together, all the associations, and all the people." This sense of solidarity has largely been premised on a politics that is inherently sceptical of authority, both governmental and international, which is seen to uphold a system that consistently fails to meet basic rights needs:

> "There is racism in Europe. In Turkey there is a civil war with the Kurds. All of the Western organisations are failing to meet the challenges to freedom of expression in Turkey."

As such, policies and practices developed by local stakeholders are informed by an understanding that the various protection needs of queer refugees are not being met because of the reliance of international organisations on ultimately state-centric mechanisms, that do little to challenge the Turkish government's asystematic approach to refugee protection. In this way, I observed a degree of 'humanitarian innovation' (Betts *et al*. 2012) in the work of local rights groups, whose awareness of complicated power structures, discourses and vulnerabilities allows them to engage more effectively with queer refugees than either UNHCR or the Turkish state, developing policies and practices that 'look inward' (*Ibid*.: 10) to the particular needs of displaced queers, whilst 'looking outward' (*Ibid*.: 12) to one another in order to develop more effective domestic protection networks.

For example, one activist felt that Turkish LGBT rights groups were well positioned to:

> "…act like a bridge, between UNHCR, refugees, DGMM and other civil society groups. For the past three years DGMM has invited us to consultancy meetings with NGOs. Well, we make them invite us."

Consequently, key organisations are throwing themselves into the debates surrounding queer refugee protection in Turkey, despite the fact that LGBT rights groups are often side-lined by the Turkish state ("[DGMM] did not want to invite us"). Moreover, participants from another organisation informed me that, where LGBT rights groups had encountered lukewarm or even hostile responses from the Turkish government, civil society groups, particularly those critical of Erdoğan's ruling AKP party, had welcomed them with enthusiasm in recent years:

> "After the Gezi Park protest[4] three years ago, there was a kind of civil uprising around Turkey. After this, lots of groups had a chance to meet each other, and hear their stories in opposition to the government."

This political climate has had some significant implications on queer refugee protection, encouraging non-LGBT organisations to reach out to LGBT rights groups so that they might be better informed about the various challenges involved in supporting queer refugees and asylum seekers.

Other key policies that have emerged include the weekly Tea and Talk service for Arabic speaking queer refugees. This is run by SPoD and LambdaIstanbul, and attracts up to 40 service users every Sunday in Istanbul. The aim of this group is to bring refugees together in a space that they control, allowing them to discuss freely a number of the challenges that they face in Turkey. Such policies, according to one activist, were reflective of the need to "talk with refugees" and "not on their behalf", especially with regards to sexuality, which is seen as an inherently subjective and problematic topic. In this way, attempts were made to safeguard refugee agency by engaging service users in projects that were fundamentally "egalitarian" in nature.

As such, and in contrast to the general impression that Turkey is an unsafe place for LGBT people, the challenges that have emerged in recent years have produced a remarkable degree of innovation on the part of non-state actors that might actually be improving the protection available to queer asylum seekers and refugees. For example, interview responses were surprisingly optimistic about the potential of different local organisations:

> "In campaigning, there is no place for losing hope. If there is no hope, there is nothing. [...] There are more activists, individuals and organisations. I know that is a gain. All those people in Kaos, SPOD, Lambda. There are now universities with LGBT clubs. There are even activist organisations in the Kurdish parts."

This interpretation was mirrored by veteran photojournalist Bradley Secker, who told me that Western "parachute journalists, [who] largely focus on the ISIS murders more than the general persecution that exists" tend to misjudge the situation in Turkey. In a separate article Secker has argued that the work of local rights groups are producing a "haven of sorts" (2015) in some parts of Turkey, and particularly in Istanbul. One Syrian refugee called Subhi was quoted as saying: "Istanbul is a bubble of freedom and gay rights in the region". In contrast to the assumptions that Turkey is an increasingly unsafe place for LGBT peoples, for some queer refugees and certain stakeholders, it seems opportunities have emerged in the context of the 'Refugee Crisis' that are enhancing protection mechanisms in lieu of more effective interventions on the part of international organisations and the Turkish state. However, the environment in which such organisations are working is fragile at best,

especially since the coup, which has lent the government a number of emergency powers many say has undermined civil society organisations in Turkey (The Guardian 2017). As such, conclusions in this direction may be premature.

Politics of Recognition

Nevertheless, a number of interviewees revealed that their engagements with queer refugees were significantly impacted by different regimes of recognition, both with regard to their own assumptions about sexual identities, and those held by refugees and international organisations. For example, the highly public and political work of certain rights groups, and the emphasis some campaigners have placed on queer sexual identities, has been off-putting for certain refugees:

> "There is a difficult encounter between transmen, transwomen, non-gender persons and so on. They are sometimes seen as queer, but in a negative way."

As such, certain support provisions for sexual minority refugees can be tense, especially when those in attendance feel uncomfortable with, or do not recognise the validity of, certain identities. Moreover, growing tensions were also revealed to me between non-refugee and refugee LGBT peoples – especially transwomen – who were found to be competition over basic resources, such as housing and food. In this sense, some of the broader solidarity that has developed between Turkish rights groups has not been fully matched with regards to the more general LGBT community:

> "There's some animosity from the Turkish LGBT community towards the Syrians in general, which also plays out towards the Syrian LGBT community."

Various stakeholders also informed me that they struggled to engage with queer women refugees, especially those who were not openly political: "I have met a lot of lesbians, but only in the Iranian community. Very rarely from Iraq and Egypt. I have not met any Syrian lesbians or transmen." Explaining this, one activist added that:

> "Iranians are very organised. When you look at the numbers, lesbians are still left out. It is really related to gender. Most of them that we reach, this is really important, have graduated from university and can speak English."

In this sense, stakeholders appeared to be held back in their recognition of queer women, who were often only engaged as well-educated activists. As such, the absence of 'non-political' queer women confirms a degree of exclusion on the part of different stakeholders, whose inability to recognise queer women outside of public and political spaces might be reproducing heteronormativity. This finding also upholds the idea that certain identities, especially those linked to sexuality-based asylum claimants, are required to be clearly gay, lesbian or trans, and that this need is generated both by the international 'legal interface' of humanitarian agencies and asylum systems, as well as the 'network of institutions and support groups [...] in the new country' (Giametta 2014: 587).

As such, my research reveals a number of challenges involved in properly engaging queer refugees and asylum seekers. This is especially true when the nature and character of certain organisations is seen to be "too queer" for refugees who, despite suffering from homophobic

persecution, feel unable to connect with the identity categories regularly deployed by LGBT rights groups in Turkey. As such, a problematic need for refugees to establish an "identity connection" was common throughout a number of policies:

> "What matters is that [refugees] have a kind of identity awareness. Ok, I am gay, bisexual or transsexual. Somehow this makes it easier to find support. For other people, who might have non-heteronormative sexual practices but who do not have an identity connection, they might not be able to access support. But of course, we have to ask whether or not this person is an LGBTI person or not."

This admission reveals the extent to which Turkish LGBT rights groups' engagements with queer refugees and asylum seekers are being informed by the 'socially available and hegemonic discourses' (Anthias 2002: 511) that exist relating to sexual identities, namely LGBT rights.

This need was also evident in different policies designed to teach refugees and asylum seekers how to speak the language of LGBT rights. For example, Kaos GL, LambdaIstanbul and ASAM have all developed workshop series designed to educate and 'coach' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016a) refugees and asylum applicants about rights categories, biphobia, transphobia and homophobia, drawing in particular on the highly legalistic framework of LGBT rights for guidance. One activist added that a number of organisational engagements with queer refugees seek to let them know that LGBT rights "is [their] problem too". This is despite the fact that many queer refugees in Turkey are seen to be disinterested in engaging with LGBT rights activism, either because they fear further persecution as a result of being a visible activist, or because "they're more concerned about the situation for Syrians and refugees more generally." In this sense, the political priorities of certain LGBT rights groups may be encouraging and even demanding a 'denial of self-expression' (Akram 2000: 18) on the part of those queer refugees who may not comfortably identify with specific stakeholder interests.

Nevertheless, the visibility of LGBT rights groups in Turkey seems to be enhancing the protection opportunities available to those who can identify with, and are recognised by, different rights groups. For example, Kaos GL has established ties with refugees prior to their departure from Syria, whilst LambdaIstanbul has had over 900 phone enquiries from different refugees and asylum seekers looking for support in Turkey.

Conclusion

Overall, the discussions I had with numerous local rights groups revealed how a number of policies and practices were premised on a mistrust of authority, both at the state and international level. As such, Turkish LGBT rights activism, and the ways in which this is engaging with refugee protection issues, has been informed by a fairly unique political context, allowing policies and practices to contest the narratives of homonationalism that typically inform Western asylum policies and international protection mechanisms. Nevertheless, the effectiveness with which certain policies are able to engage with queer refugees can be understood in relation to the different and sometimes conflicting ways in which refugees, stakeholders and international organisations presume, recognise, and mobilise sexual categories. Ultimately, LGBT rights frameworks are problematic because, for many queer refugees, such categories do not 'constitute an expression of authentic individual experience' (Spijkerboer 2013: 227). However, for those who are able to identify, a number of effective policies have been put in

place that both support refugees during their time in Turkey, and assist them in securing international protection.

Finally, my research has identified how a number of local LGBT rights groups, in response to the failures of international humanitarian organisations, and the enhanced authoritarianism of the Turkish government, are developing innovative responses to the 'Refugee Crisis'. More precisely, my research has identified some of the ways in which 'global processes are affecting local responses' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Pacitto 2015), opening up the space for new political formations and new protection solutions that are otherwise lost 'within the more powerful discursive fields […] produced by the international humanitarian regime [and] national asylum [systems]' (Sigona 2014: 378). In this way local practitioners in Turkey are resisting the assumptions of homonationalist and homonormative frameworks which often 'foist a Western sexual ontology' on activists in non-European or North American spaces (Rao 2010: 188). By contrast, an anti-statist politics is informing the engagements of local LGBT rights groups, establishing a more progressive rights movement in lieu of the limits of international and governmental responses to queer refugees (and refugees more generally). Of course, how far these conclusions can be maintained in light of the current political climate in Turkey is debatable. Nevertheless, further research into this issue could firstly help to square criticisms of the Turkish Government with criticisms of international homonormativity and, secondly, enable a more nuanced understanding of the processes underpinning responses to and engagements with sexual minority refugees displaced from/within the Middle East.[5]

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[1] Forthcoming research on this issue is being published by Routledge as part of an edited volume titled *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis* (see in particular Zeynep Kivilcim's chapter "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) Syrian Refugees in Turkey")

[2] Recognition of LGBT refugees is framed under the 1951 Refugee Convention in relation to Art. 1A(2) 'Membership of a Particular Social Group', although other forms of recognition are available, but often less used by sexual minority applicants.

[3] 'Women-and-children' refers to the tendency within humanitarian discourses to represent female victimhood (and that of their children) in relation to 'Madonna and Child' narratives (Del Zotto 2002). Interestingly, such representational discourses have been challenged by the context of the 'Refugee Crisis', which Jennifer Allsopp believes has given form to 'demilitarised masculinities' and the rendering of men-as-victims (2015), an outcome clearly visible in relation to gay male refugees.

[4] The Gezi Park protests of 28 May 2013 saw millions of Turkish people rise up against the government in an act of civil non-violent resistance. Protesters, who encompassed a broad umbrella of interests, from LGBT rights, to environmentalists, to civil liberties activists and feminists, were involved, and continue to meet regularly as a result.

[5] This argument has also been informed by my work with the <removed for anonymity purposes>. Our methodology is built around a belief that pluralism is essential in order to develop effective, grassroots-led development projects. These findings also aim to contribute to an AHRC-ESRC funded project investigating local community responses to displacement in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (2016-2020), led by Dr. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, UCL (refugeehosts.org)