



## REFUGEE CAMPS IN TURKEY AND IRAQI KURDISTAN

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The purpose of this paper is to critically question the role that refugee camps play in sorting desirable from undesirable refugees. The paper begins by reviewing some of the theories that attempt to explain the particularities of refugee experience. Weaving Agamben's conceptualization of the state of exception through discussions of physical vulnerability, liminality, and feminized space the first section fleshes out the tensions between humanitarian intervention, human rights, and the condition of life in refugee camps. Focusing primarily on reports produced by national and international agencies, the UNHCR, and non-government organizations (NGOs) the second and third sections take a closer look at refugee camps in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, and attempts to provide an overview of the living conditions in refugee camps. Rather than focusing on individual experiences or testimony, attention is focused on the structural management of the camps. As such the paper provides critical reflection on the uneven living conditions engendered by a fractured and politicized humanitarian system.

Turkey's position as a transit country has greatly influenced the Turkish government's approach to refugee camps, which are officially titled "Temporary Protection Centers." Primarily host to Syrian refugees, camps along the southern border are well maintained, and have been used as a political tool to build Turkey's international reputation. In contrast, refugee camps built by pro-Kurdish municipalities, which are host to Yazidi refugees, are considered "unregistered" camps by Turkish authorities and have been granted little official attention. Yazidi refugees in these camps are not protected under the Temporary Protection Act, and do not have the same level of access to resources as Syrian refugees. Leftist unions have provided support on a voluntary basis, and basic needs are met; however resources are waning.

Initially host to internally displaced Iraqis, refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan saw an influx of Syrian Kurds as conflict escalated in Syria. Unlike refugee camps in Turkey, which are government managed, camps in Iraqi Kurdistan are operated by an array of international and local NGOs. There are countless reports authored by the large number of NGOs operating in Iraqi Kurdistan making it very difficult to get a clear picture of living conditions in these camps. Each camp has its own rules and regulations, and services are divided by sector and assigned to a different organization. Another contrast that can be drawn with Turkish run refugee camps is the existence of refugee councils. Syrian refugees take part in camp management along with the UNHCR and the Kurdish Regional Government. While refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan and

Turkey display notable difference, the Mahmur camp, operated with assistance from the Kurdistan Workers Party and the UNHCR, is perhaps the most distinct. The Mahmur camp was established in 1994 for Kurdish refugees from Turkey, and has been designed to resemble a village with small-scale farming. The camp is governed by a people's assembly, which is elected annually from within the camp. Strengthening the collective agency of refugees, the Mahmur camp stands out because it moves away from a humanitarian model that inadvertently constructs refugees as undesirable.

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