

Life on the edge for Turkey's fearful, unwanted Syrian refugees



Lorraine Mallinder

in Little Aleppo, Ankara

Poverty and police harassment are now routine for the Syrians Turkey is determined to send back home

The food stall on Selcuk Street is doing a roaring trade, customers chatting at the counter as they wait to buy cakes sizzling in a giant pan. But everyone falls silent when five men dressed in black appear, one flipping open his wallet to reveal a police badge. When the owner protests, he is pulled to one side, one of the plainclothes officers violently grabbing him by the shirt collar and pushing him around.

Welcome to Little Aleppo, a rundown neighbourhood in Ankara's Altindag district, where thousands of Syrian refugees live in constant fear of being picked up by police and forcibly deported to their war-torn country – with lethal consequences.

"I am always having problems with the police here," one of the stall's workers tells The Irish Times. As if to prove the point, the police turn up seconds later and start interrogating workers, customers and this reporter.

Turkey has become a hostile environment for the 3.7 million Syrian refugees it hosts, most of whom have temporary protection ID cards, known as kimlic. The country operated a generous open-door policy after the Syrian war broke out in 2011, but as the global economic crisis bites, hate crimes, racist rhetoric and bullying from officials have become the norm for many.

But while life here is dangerous, it is still preferable to being sent back to Bashar al-Assad's regime. "Torture and death will await them," says Ghazwan Kronfol, director of the Syrian Lawyers Association in Istanbul.

Sitting in one of the neighbourhood's many Syrian-run shops, Omar looks nervously out the window. Sometimes local Turks will barge into his shop and harass the customers, asking: "When are you going home? Why are you here now? Syria is safe now. Go!"

Street fight

Two years ago, his shop window was smashed after riots broke out following the death of a Turkish youth in a street fight with local Syrians. "The police just stood by," says Omar. To this day, windows still get smashed, and cars belonging to Syrians— identifiable from their registration plates – get vandalised.

Originally from Homs, Omar asks that his real name not be used, for fear of reprisals. He arrived in Little Aleppo with his wife and their two young girls nearly five years ago. The older daughter now attends school in Altindag, the only one in the family who speaks any Turkish.

Their entire lives are spent in the immediate vicinity of Selcuk Street. Omar's life is "working, eating and sleeping seven days a week", he says. "If I don't work, there's no food for my family."

Things are about to get worse. Omar's landlord recently told him that rent for his two-bedroom flat would be going up by more than 60 per



■ Little Aleppo, Ankara: Turkey has become hostile for the 3.7 million Syrian refugees it hosts, with hate crimes, racism and bullying from officials prevalent.

PHOTOGRAPH: LORRAINE MALLINDER

cent. Syrian refugees, who moved to the neighbourhood because of its proximity to low-paid jobs in the factories of nearby Siteler, are regularly held to ransom, he says. Landlords know that their tenants won't move, partly because of the high costs of registering a change of address at the municipality, which requires that documents be certified by a notary. But mainly, they fear that the authorities will seize upon the

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opportunity to deport them to Syria.

"So, what the landlord asks for, we have to pay," says Omar.

Rights groups have documented rising numbers of forced deportations. Nadia Hardman, of Human Rights Watch, says Syrian refugees are often detained on the pretext that their records need updating. "They are picked up in the street or at work, lied to and taken to different detention centres," she says. "Some people get their phones taken from

them, so they enter this black hole."

Hardman, who reported hundreds of deportations between February and July last year, gathered testimonies from Syrians coerced into signing voluntary repatriation forms, who had been driven to the border in handcuffs, some forced across the border at gunpoint.

Ahmed (27), dares not leave Little Aleppo, though with the soaring cost of food and energy, he is desperate to find work. Speaking by phone, the Homs native, who also requested his real name be withheld, says he used to work as a driver delivering goods such as energy drinks to Syrian traders—a risky occupation at a time when the authorities are clamping down on refugees moving between provinces.

Under the terms of their temporary protection status, Syrians must seek official permission through an online government portal before travelling, a process that can be lengthy and cumbersome, often requiring documentary evidence justifying travel, another potential trap that could lead to deportation. "In most cases, the requests are rejected. This forces Syrians to travel without permission," says Kronfol.

At best, Syrian refugees who are caught travelling without a permit face a fine of about 1,000 Turkish lira or €45 – though Ahmed claims that some have been made to pay three or four times that amount. At worst, they face deportation to Syria. Having been locked up for opposing Assad's regime before fleeing Syria in 2018, it's a risk Ahmed cannot afford to take. Unable to afford rent, he is now staying at his uncle's place.

Speaking to residents of Little Aleppo, there is a sense of living under siege, with reports of police systematically stopping anyone seen outside after 8pm – "everyone's scared of them," says one local. And, if it's not the police, they fear attacks from locals.

Hate crime against Syrians is on the rise across Turkey, with a series of attacks in recent times. In 2021, three Syrian construction workers in Izmir were killed in their sleep after an ar-

son attack by a Turkish man, who had already warned police he would strike.

In September 2022, a Syrian teenager in Antakya was stabbed to death by a mob, allegedly after an accident at work that injured his boss. He had just been accepted to study medicine at a local university.

Tensions between Turks and Syrians are mounting ahead of the general election on May 14th. Afraid of losing votes, president Recep Tayyip Erdogan last year announced his intention to resettle one million voluntary returnees in areas of northern Syria, which are not controlled by the Assad regime. Signs of a rapprochement between Turkey and Syria are unlikely to reassure potential candidates, particularly since Assad is pushing for a removal of Turkish troops from northern Syria.

Willingly resettled

In January, Erdogan reported that more than half a million Syrian refugees had willingly been resettled, claiming that voluntary returns were "accelerating". Despite evidence of forced deportations, the government claims that its laws are in compliance with the 1951 Geneva conventions, which bar signatory states from returning refugees to places where they face threats to their lives or freedom. "Turkey's position is nobody is forced to return [that] this is fabricated, this it's not happening. It's just a blanket denial," says Hardman.

Opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the Republican People's Party, who stands a reasonable chance of becoming the country's next president, appears to be singing from the same hymn sheet. He has repeatedly pledged to send Syrian refugees home within two years, claiming they would be going back of their own volition. The main contenders in the election both want to deport Syrians, says Kronfol. "They only differ on the means to achieve this."

In Little Aleppo, the elections might as well not be happening. With no future in Turkey, many are still pinning their hopes on Europe, despite their dwindling chances of reaching

safety. Brussels effectively outsourced its migration policy to Ankara under a controversial 2016 deal, sending refugees back to Turkey – now deemed unsafe by rights groups – in exchange for aid and other promises. "There are persistent attempts across the borders of Greece and Bulgaria, and even by travelling to Belarus and through Poland," says Kronfol. "Most of them fail, but some of them achieve their goal."

Battling impossible odds, Omar is considering the only viable option left on the table. "I am thinking of going to Europe, it doesn't matter where," he says. "But I want to go with my family. Wherever we end up living, my biggest dream is to own a home and a car. I want to give my family a good life."

Ahmed feels the same. "If I can up and leave, I'll go," he says. "There's nothing for me here."



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