

An Answer to the Global Refugee Crisis: No Barrier Too Strong

Bahçe, Osmaniye, Turkey

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Project Details

The aim of this project was to help Syrian refugee children adapt to their new home and country, Turkey, more comfortably. After traumatic experiences in Syria, these children have been deprived of a genuine childhood and possibly have psychological issues because of it.

Though we had originally planned to do the project in Hatay, we could not due to safety reasons. Luckily, with the help of Alperen's father and a few other connections, we were able to relocate the project to Bahçe, a small province of Osmaniye. In Osmaniye, there is a population of roughly 14,000 people, 2,000 of whom are Syrian refugees. Before Syrians, Bahçe was an isolated small town. When a Syrian family came to there for the first time and noticed how welcoming the people are and how affordable life was, news spread out. Bahçe has become a big Syrian refugee hub. It was relatively easier to find jobs there. Families coming from the border started to settle in Bahçe thanks to the support led by Yüksel Korkmaz, who owns one of the markets in the village and is the local head of a charity organization called *İlim Yayma Cemiyeti*. Mr. Korkmaz helped these families settle in and find jobs and homes. He noticed the Syrian teachers trying to teach kids in mosques after praying to prevent them from falling behind their peers. He decided to use his organization's residence hall for Syrian students as a school since it is vacant during the day. After reconstruction of the residence hall and turning the first 3 floors into school with computers, desks, books, boards and a cafeteria, they were ready to start education. The school started with 40 students and two teachers. The teachers were husband and wife. As the Syrian population grew, the students and teachers increased. Mr. Korkmaz arranged school buses for the kids from rural areas in the village. The school is running, the teachers are teaching math, science, Arabic and Turkish. After graduating, they go to certain Turkish schools based on their skills. Most tend to study theology, since Arabic is their native language. However, smaller students want to be soldiers to defend their home, or doctors to treat the sick and wounded.

While there were language and cultural barriers, one of our main goals was to break them. As a majority of the students speak only Arabic, we taught them basic Turkish conversational phrases. Also, we took the students on field trips to various museums and national landmarks to teach them about Turkish culture and history. These activities provide the children with a better understanding of Turkey and allow them to feel more comfortable in their new home.

The children love to play soccer but when we arrived they were playing on a beat up dirt field with a deflated basketball. By purchasing the children a new ball and organizing an official game with referees and teams during lunch break on Friday we were able to start a tradition. The children enjoyed the first game so much that the next Friday they prepared their own times and color coordinated t-shirts to play a red versus blue team match. It was like World Cup game where fans were cheering enthusiastically and players taking the game extremely serious.

We could see the growth in happiness and comfort from the students during our month there very clearly. Due to the horrific scenes they saw in their youth, the psychology of the children had been affected. During our conversations with the teachers, they told us that at the start of the program the children would hide under their desks whenever a plane flew by. In art class at the beginning of the program, the children drew pictures of bombings, death and funerals. However, at the end of our project they were drawing warless images including intact mosques, green landscapes, sunshine, trees and bright colors.

The overall feeling of this project was hospitable, welcoming, friendly, feeling at home, even though we had to change our location and scope. A key question we asked Syrian kids and their families was "Do you feel at home in Turkey?" We focused on the aspects that made them feel Bahçe was not their home and tried to change this through our project. Learning Turkish was a major obstacle, so we taught them basic gestures and short phrases that can help them in their daily lives. Despite going through a challenging (we were hospitalized for viral infection) and laborious experience, we have accomplished something beneficial and probably changed these kids' lives forever. We have broadened their horizons; given them courage, and most importantly we have become new brothers and sisters

Our Project and Peace

To us, peace can happen when members of a community feel secure and comfortable wherever they are. When there are no external forces impeding on the happiness of one's life and instead they feel love, then there can be peace. Our project helped Syrian students view their new home, Turkey, as a place of welcoming and peace. In this confusing and difficult time of their lives, the children involved in our program were provided with a warm acceptance to Turkey. Because of this experience, we hope that the children will carry on the cheerful and positive sentiment we left them with. This project reassured us that no matter what one's situation is, there are no barriers that are so strong they can prevent them from living a peaceful life.

"This project was valuable because we showed the children sympathy in this hectic time in their lives and became brothers and sisters with them. By listening to stories in their perspective, we were able to understand that war is wicked and children are most affected by it. We hope this project will help them promote peace for the rest of their lives as we will do ourselves."

-Alperen Akkoyunlu

