The ongoing war in Syria and displacement of millions worldwide has shaken citizens around the world, compelling many to offer assistance, while also challenging the universally defined social categories and legal processes that inform these responses. Much of the mainstream (and western oriented) focus on the global ‘refugee crisis’ oscillates between two hegemonic representations: the abstract and individuated ideals of “universal humanity” which inform the political discourse around humanitarianism, and the ethnically and territorially defined categories of national citizenship and belonging against which an objectified figure of “the refugee” comes into question. Humanitarian discourses tend to depoliticise the conditions and consequences of displacement by obscuring the already racialised, sexualised, and religious framings of the refugee as an object of compassion or suspicion. In comparison, the state-centered approaches often naturalise the political conditions of
borders, territorial divisions, and ethnic boundaries of citizenship that have in fact produced multiple forms of displacement to which the nation-state is now posed as the solution.

The Regional Studies Association Research Network on the Politics of Displacement, Identity and Urban Citizenship in Migratory Contexts aims to bring together scholars, regional specialists, activists and experts from civil society to offer alternatives to these perspectives by attending to the historical, socio-spatial and religious underpinnings of displacement that complicate notions of universal humanity and bounded citizenship.

Aims and key research questions

Employing a transnational approach that is attentive to regional and historical particularities, we aim to provide nuanced perspectives on the lives and struggles of displaced populations from below, as these lives are shaped by the contingencies of place and movement. The network seeks to engage broader discussions with its members on the following overarching questions and themes:

- In what ways has the global ‘refugee crisis’ unsettled and recreated regions, territories and urban spaces?
- How does power operate within mundane social relations and how are these relations interrupted, circumscribed, and transformed by the frames of humanitarianism and national citizenship?
- When do the micro-political relations of hospitality, neighborliness, friendship, and kinship mirror the broader political processes, and what alternatives to policy, if any, do they provide?
- What is the role of space, scale, and place making in addressing displacement as a historically produced and socially configured force of everyday interaction? How do displaced people make claims to the city through pluralistic social, political, and religious practices and alternative economic networks?
- What are the impacts of transregional and transnational mobility on ethno-religious identities, urban transformation, and regional and territorial policies in the face of rapidly changing and increasingly precarious lived realities?

Through a collaborative exploration of these questions via four events in four countries over three years, the network aims to highlight the political and cultural stakes of displacement within the fragmented and pluralistic city spaces where the majority of refugees reside today.

Inaugural workshop: Displacement, Transnational Mobility, and Religious Realities, June 26-27, 2018, Lyon, France

The first event of the research network was organized by Dr. Secil Dagtas and Dr. Samadia Sadouni with additional funding from the Collegium de Lyon and TRIANGLE UMR 5026. In this inaugural workshop we focused on religion as a productive lens with which to examine the knowledges, representations, and socialities of displacement and transnational mobility. This focus aimed to address the shortcomings of secular epistemologies and top-down perspectives in understanding the lived realities and spatial experiences of displaced populations. We adopted a transnational approach that is attentive to regional and historical particularities, and sought to start a conversation about these topics between scholars and civil society actors specializing on territories and urban spaces across the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean.

To provide alternatives to top-down and nation-state focused perspectives on displacement, we invited scholars and civil society actors who do “on the ground” work with displaced populations in urban contexts of different regions that are unsettled by the global ‘refugee crisis’. Theoretically, we prioritized papers that adopted a transnational approach without losing sight of the regional and
historical particularities of these contexts. These papers provided nuanced perspectives on the contingencies of the local dwelling and trans-border movements of displaced populations across the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean. Methodologically, we focused on research that uses qualitative geographical methods such as ethnography, interviews, and visual methodologies in exploring the socio spatial dimensions and lived experience of the refugees and migrants in urban contexts. Our approach to the selection of workshop participants was both multiregional and interdisciplinary (with scholars from the disciplines of geography, anthropology, sociology, and political science).

This two-day workshop included two panels with multiple sessions. The first panel, Refugees, Mobilisations and Hospitality, featured presentations on topics such as the concept of precarity as a spatial-political means of governing refugee mobility through the experience of Syrian refugees in Turkey, and examined the problems of, and policy alternatives to, humanitarianism in the Greek context. Conversations took place on the conceptualization of regionally constructed and defined migrant identities in West Africa and about displaced people’s identities and experiences in Lebanon by centering on gender and queer perspectives. The second panel, Migrant Journeys, Mobility in Context, featured the presentation and discussion of case studies from Turkey, Egypt, Iran, France and Germany with methodological approaches that prioritized the migrant experiences and voices for understanding the formation of regional identities in contexts of transborder mobility. These presentations problematized the state-centric border restrictions by looking at the historical processes of transnational population movement; introduced the use of religion as resource and a form of infrastructure in the temporal reconfigurations of border making, urban citizenship, and in holding together mobile communities. It also examined the notion of hospitality in urban contexts of intense migration-led diversification in the lived experience of the web of ethnicity, religion, gender, and social capital. Together, these conversations emphasized the historicity of territorial and regional borders as politically constructed and regulated, yet culturally and religiously porous entities.

The event also included a public roundtable, Forced Migration, Social Inclusion, and Humanitarian Actions in Context, with speakers from civil society organizations that engage in humanitarian work in non-conventional ways. The roundtable was organized around two broad themes that derived from the testimonies and analyses of refugees and/or civil society actors:
1) differences and similarities in the regional management and social inclusion of displaced populations across different European countries and their margins;

2) modes and actions of solidarity that may emerge from such comparative perspectives and exchange of ideas and experiences.

In this roundtable, Marina Liakis (Orange House – Zaatar Organization, Greece) conveyed first-hand experience of neighborhood-based civil society initiatives that attend to displaced populations on the margins of Europe. In line with the two main trajectories of the roundtable, she outlined the significance of region- and country-specific approaches to the ‘global refugee crisis’. Another panelist, Sabreen Al Rassace (Lesbinennes of Colour & REVIVRE, France, Syria) adopted an intersectional feminist approach to the current crisis of displacement and contributed to the question of regional identity by documenting how gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class intersect in the refugee experience and construct the refugee as a transgression to the otherwise stratified borders of cities, regions and nations. The interventions and ensuing discussions highlighted that refugees are not only human beings in need of material help, but are also social and political beings who transform the social, political, and urban milieus of which they become part.

As the first event of the research network, this workshop planted the seeds for long-term conversations between scholars of migration and displacement. Two additional workshops are being planned (in Canada and Europe), which will shift the conceptual focus from religion to the themes that were already touched on in some of the presentations (e.g. territorial politics of asylum, urban citizenship and hospitality, solidarity, and social fragmentation). Selected papers from these two events will be compiled for a special issue to be submitted to the RSA journal Territory, Politics, Governance. The fourth and final event will be organized as two special sessions at the American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting in Denver, USA, in June 2020, titled ‘Conceptualizing and Comparing Urban Citizenship in Migratory Contexts’. In addition, the Network will be organizing two special sessions at the RSA Annual Conference in June, 2019, Santiago de Compostela, Spain.
About the authors

Dr. Secil Dagtas is an assistant professor of Anthropology at the University of Waterloo and a research fellow at the Collegium de Lyon, sdagtas@uwaterloo.ca

Dr. Hülya Arik is a postdoctoral fellow in Gender Studies at the Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg, hulya.arik@gu.se

Johanna Reynolds is a PhD candidate in Geography at York University (Toronto, Canada) and works on education and research programming at the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, jreynol@yorku.ca

Dr. Kristen Biehl is an anthropologist specialized in migration research on Turkey and affiliated with Istanbul Policy Center at Sabanci University, kristen.biehl@gmail.com