

Putting the Humanity Back in Humanitarianism: Neoliberalism in Non-Governmental Organizations Working with Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Abstract

As a worldwide hegemonic ideology, neoliberalism institutionalizes its economic/social principles of extreme austerity for social services, unlimited commodification of people, the co-opted emphasis on individualism, and the guise of apoliticalization. Humanitarian organizations do not exist outside of this process but are instead directly shaped by it. This paper seeks to answer how national and international neoliberal agendas drive the creation of NGOs that work with Syrian refugees in Turkey. How do those NGOs then incorporate neoliberal ideas into their policies? Literature review is used within a critical theory framework to make the argument that the neoliberal tenets (austerity, commodification, individualism, and apoliticalization) are the primary causes of non-governmental organizations' role as primary managers of the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey. The above neoliberal principles then also influence the procedures that these NGOs enact which in turn reduce the NGOs' efficacy and introduce various ethical concerns.

Keywords: neoliberalism, non-governmental organizations, austerity, commodification, individualism, apoliticalization, Syrian refugees, Turkey

Putting the Humanity Back in Humanitarianism: Neoliberalism in Non-Governmental Organizations Working with Syrian Refugees in Turkey

In the global order of neoliberalism, humanitarianism is often perceived as a resistance to the politics of extreme capitalism that destroys communalistic thought and action. However, a more nuanced understanding reveals that neoliberalism and much of what is classified as humanitarian work is, in reality, inextricably linked. Within the umbrella of service work are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - those groups outside of normal government structure that provide humanitarian goods and services. It might be superficially presumed by the public that NGOs have an antagonistic relationship with NGOs. On the contrary, neoliberalism has caused a rapid growth of the humanitarian sector which, from a critical theory perspective, denotes a shared agenda between neoliberalism and NGOs that is hugely problematic and publicly unacknowledged.

This paper seeks to interrogate the connections between neoliberalism and non-governmental organizations in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. The research questions are as follows: How does neoliberalism impose economic principles on non-economic institutions? How do national and international neoliberal agendas drive the creation of NGOs that then enact neoliberal policies in their humanitarian efforts towards Syrian refugees in Turkey? Literature review is used within the critical theory framework of political rationality to argue that neoliberalism institutionalizes the ideological/economic principles of extreme austerity for social services, unlimited commodification of people, the co-opted emphasis on individualism, and the guise of apoliticalization. Those neoliberal tenets (austerity, commodification, individualism, and

apoliticalization) are the primary causes of non-governmental organizations' role as primary managers of the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey. When the Turkish government places the responsibility of caring for Syrian refugees in the hands of NGOs, the practice of these neoliberal principles by NGOs then introduces efficacy and ethics concerns including competition for aid and short-term, precarious aid.

Section 1: Ideological and Historical Contexts

Theoretical Foundations: Critical Theory and Neoliberalism

Critical theory is a broad lens for social science research that emphasizes a critique of all power structures, challenging the normative systems of ubiquitous inequity. It inherently opposes all perceptions of the world that are hegemonic, Western, or privilege certain classes, races, genders, or other categories of people over others. Wendy Brown (2016) offers a type of critical theory centered on the political rationality of neoliberalism. Neoliberal ideology becomes the standardized perspective for responding to political issues even when those policies are not directly economic. Governments will enact social policies that implement economic logic because the political figures (both inside and outside of government) that most shape the laws are the economic elites that neoliberalism created. In this way, neoliberalism can be expressed as a political rationality because the demographics of those that pass the laws and their positionality within neoliberalism (as the primary beneficiaries) explains why economic-logic policies on social issues are advocated instead of policies that might be more effective.

Most of the public has grown to accept neoliberal political rationality because of the rhetorical attacks neoliberal proponents have wielded since the ideology's conception. They

argue that all human rights are tied to the functioning of the market; when it thrives, individuals receive all the rights and privileges they need. Neoliberalism's function is to protect the market above all other human institutions, which if the theorists are to be believed, will ensure that all of humanity is protected too. David Harvey (2005) provides specifics on the aims of neoliberalism as channeled through this apparent humanistic framing. In neoliberal theory, "human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework categorized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). The precedence of economic well-being is established as a *moral imperative*, and any following fiscal policies that increase the earnings of the market are justified wholesale, without consideration for the actual human cost of such policies. It is an end-justify-the-means type of argument that in practice is applied to far more than just economics. All policies, not just economic ones, are consciously or unconsciously created to utilize these neoliberal undertones. Wendy Brown (2016) emphasizes this point by stating, neoliberalism "extends market metrics and practices to every dimension of human life" (p. 5). Even as the government seeks to shift responsibility for many government programs into private hands, it still uses these economic rationales in every sector. The key goals of neoliberal governance are the accumulation of wealth and the creation of new markets even at the expense of dispossession of wealth and diminished access to services for the majority. One aspect of this is that the economic elite prospers while the non-elite struggle. Critical theory must be utilized in discussions of neoliberalism precisely because neoliberalism influences every type of policy-making. As such, it has a reciprocal relationship with every system of oppression from classism to sexism, racism, ableism, etc.

Within this critical theory perspective, four primary themes of neoliberalism stand out as particular causes for the efficacy and ethics issues embedded in the way that NGOs manage Syrian refugees in Turkey:

- **Austerity** as not just an economic principle, but also a premise for passing judgment on what is considered more valuable to society.
- **Commodification** of people which overrules traditional human rights doctrines. The desire to create new markets is expressed by the establishment of people as a type of commodity, which encourages the redefinition of human rights to one that endorses the commodification of people as a public good.
- **Individualism** that inspires both the rhetoric of individual responsibility (“pull yourself up by your bootstraps” ideology) while at the same time weakening the possibility for collective-based resistance to the neoliberal hegemony. It is advocated for as a natural right but is also used as a weapon to maintain control.
- **Apoliticalization** as a tactic that disguises neoliberalism’s privileging of the economic elite while it discourages popular resistance to these disadvantageous policies

“Creative Destruction”: The Growth of Non-Governmental Organizations

Austerity, commodification, individualism, and apoliticalization mingle in neoliberalism’s technique for becoming so normalized that it seems completely invulnerable to the public eye. This technique is neoliberalism’s systematic destruction of institutions that oppose it. Neoliberalism dismantles collective bargaining, government regulations, and human

rights protections. This activity is cloaked in the argument that under neoliberalism theory (which promises freedom), these practices are wasteful or redundant. In order to cement neoliberalism as the dominant economic and political theory worldwide, this tactic of “creative destruction” (David Harvey, 2005, p.3) built economic, political, and social systems around neoliberalism by tearing down everything else. As such, neoliberalism in government particularly wages war against welfare (social services) systems in which special support or services are provided to ‘disadvantaged’ groups which may include children, mothers, the impoverished, people with disabilities, and (pertinent to this discussion) refugees.

Neoliberalism perceives welfare as anathema to its values because of the previously indicated themes of austerity, commodification, individualism, and apoliticalization. Austerity as an economic principle advocates minimizing production costs to maximize profit. On the public policy stage, neoliberalism views welfare programs as unnecessary costs, and therefore prime areas to cut government expenditures. To justify this position, neoliberal governments judge those recipient groups and their worthiness based on several factors. The criteria for this judgment include: perceived vulnerability, ability to (someday) provide a return on investment, and social/political capital to be gained from this financial assistance. In this logic, the theme of commodification is expressed as people are condensed into numerical gains or losses to the economized political system. Human-rights-based policies are no longer the primary focuses when policy is created, and preventable ethical violations, discrimination or othering, and dehumanization is permitted if that produces the most profitable option.

For those that do not come out positively in this equation and find their aid cut, neoliberal theory has other ways of justifying their callous denial of aid. First, individualism doctrines posit that it is the individual's responsibility to achieve success through hard work and freedom of opportunity—which the free market is presumed to provide. Failure is also an individual problem caused by a deficiency of hard work and therefore not to be blamed on the loss of public services. Secondly, neoliberal ideology encourages the growth of non-governmental organizations. This growth can be attributed to the social capital purchased by non-governmental organizations through their aid of disadvantaged people, in this case, Syrian refugees. When the government has no responsibility to provide services not deemed economically sound, private groups that fill the gap are heroes that go above and beyond their duty to help these communities. They spend funds and receive international acclaim and more donations; they do not oppose neoliberalism but rather work within its framework. Private aid organizations then help to shift the common perception of welfare out of the political domain into the private one, a trend of apoliticalization. The public forgets that they used to agree on their entitlement to this assistance through a political system in which they invested their own money (through taxes) and some of their rights (through the citizenship compact). Alexander and Fernandez's (2020) definition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reflects this understanding of the obligation to provide social services under neoliberalism. They write, "[NGOs] are private, voluntary, not-for-profit organizations dedicated to a public good" (p. 370). However, NGOs are *not* voluntary in the austerity-obsessed climate of neoliberalism in which the government refuses to take responsibility for social services.

Within the broad category of NGOs are narrower types of NGOs determined by organizational reach (international and local NGOs) and service emphasis (needs-based and rights-based NGOs). Mackreath and Sağrıç (2017) delineate needs-based and rights-based NGOs: “Those organizations which are ‘needs-based’ are usually focused on providing material assistance, such as food, shelter, education, and healthcare, while those which are defined as ‘rights-based’ are focused on advocating for the rights of Syrians - the fulfillment of their legal rights, their empowerment, and their ability to break the cycle of poverty and dispossession” (p.12). This difference in primary goals greatly influences the way that an NGO organizes itself, the rules and regulations it enacts, even the political underpinnings it represents. Needs-based NGOs work to increase the quantity of services they provide, while rights-based NGOs are centered around the way that services are distributed—the equity of who should receive aid and the dynamics between the refugees and the local community. The end goal is not to fill a need but remove the cause of that need, and as such, needs-based and rights-based NGOs reflect differing levels of politicality. Rights-based organizations take a more overtly political tone, while at the same time being far less common than needs-based organizations. This paradigm reflects the movement towards aid providers that are apolitical, which supports the thesis that neoliberalism favors the creation of NGOs, especially needs-based ones. The greater occurrence of needs-based NGOs means that this paper will focus on those types of NGOs as well as international NGOs because of the relative accessibility of information about their procedures, compared to local NGOs in Turkey.

Historical Background: Neoliberalism in the Syrian Civil War

The history of Syria follows the global turn towards neoliberalism and makes it evident that neoliberalism was the leading cause of the Syrian Civil War (the conflict that precipitated the decade-long and ongoing Syrian refugee crisis). Syria became an independent nation after the end of World War II alongside the creation of the United Nations. From 1958 to 1961 Syria merged with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. After the Coup of 1963, the Ba'ath Party has governed the country, and since 1970 the rulers have come solely from the Assad family. Though the Ba'ath Party espoused a socialist ideology in the beginning, their partnership with the military in the coup as well as their strong nationalism, protection of some private property rights, and denial of the theory of class conflict made it not ill-disposed to neoliberal tendencies (İnci Kargin, 2018).

These neoliberal tendencies erupted when Bashar al-Assad assumed control of the dictatorship after his father's death. Neoliberal policies were implemented as a reactionary measure to mitigate the economic downturn of the 1980s-1990s as well as civil unrest over the authoritarian government. The new direction in policy could be characterized by a drive to 'develop and modernize' in order to dissuade a popular oppositional movement. Kargin (2018) details specific legislation that Assad enacted: "Private banks were permitted to operate in Syria, public goods were privatized, and the ban on carrying foreign currency was lifted" (p. 36). Liberalizing the economy was intended to stimulate financial growth but this enlargement of economic freedoms then countermanded any official efforts for increases in political freedoms. This negotiation of which freedoms should be granted to citizens shifted perceptions of neoliberalism into the apolitical sphere because neoliberalism was viewed as an economic principle rather than an entry point into corresponding 'political' changes. This framing is a

conscious choice to obfuscate the political implication of the country's new economic direction. The changes to the economic system were a political strategy to divert attention from the lack of political change. Kargin also refers to the end of government subsidies that had been available to the majority of the population and efforts to bring in wealth by creating a capitalistic elite class that exacerbated economic inequality. Austerity and individualism clearly influenced these policies as well as the commodification of people into categories of useful (wealthy) and non-useful (poor) to decide whose interests the government would favor.

Neoliberal economic measures that solely benefitted the economic elites and the promise of trickle-down prosperity was not enough to keep the peace. In March of 2011, pro-reform protestors demonstrated in Damascus and Daraa against the authoritarian dictatorship, economic policies that were debilitating to the majority of the citizens, and a stark lack of political freedoms. A violent response from the government followed. By August, oppositional groups across the country had more or less unified into the Syrian National Council and initiated a bloody civil war against the Syrian state with human rights abuses on both sides.

Commodifying Citizenship: Neoliberalism in the Syrian Refugee Crisis

The Syrian Civil War has created the largest refugee crisis in over forty years. In ten years of conflict, 5.6 million refugees have been officially registered and some 1.2 more are estimated to have been displaced without official refugee status. Within Syria, an additional 6.7 million people are internally displaced, meaning that they were forced to leave their homes but unable to leave the country. The rough total of all of these types of refugees is 13.5 million people. The Syrian refugee crisis is largely being managed intra-regionally, with the majority of

refugees settling in other Middle Eastern countries. 3.7 million Syrian refugees have been settled in Turkey, 855,000 in Lebanon, 668,000 in Jordan, 247,000 in Iraq, and 132,000 in Egypt (Reid, 2021). This analysis focuses on Turkey as a major recipient country, though the analysis of the way that neoliberalism is intertwined with NGOs is likely expressed in analogous ways worldwide.

This configuration of refugee resettlement that heavily relies on settlement in the Middle East is not simply a matter of convenience. Instead, it is yet another iteration of neoliberalism's themes of austerity, individualism, and commodification on the global stage. The conflict that informs refugee settlement patterns is centered around a divide between countries of the Global North and countries of the Global South. Nations of the Global North are roughly defined as 'developed' countries that include Europe, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Russian, and Japan among others. Meanwhile, nations of the Global South are considered 'underdeveloped' and commonly refer to most Latinamerican, Caribbean, African, Middle Eastern countries as well as China, India, Thailand, and the Pacific Islands. These are not static, definitive, or exhaustive designations, but rather a broad stroke meant to facilitate generalized observations on a global scale.

Nations of the Global North tend to view immense refugee influxes as damaging to their countries because of the amount of aid they will require from their governments. Austerity is a primary argument employed to refuse refugee placement. Rather than a true commitment to the economic policy of spending less money, austerity in neoliberalism is an ideological weapon that expresses the view that refugees have deficit value to host societies. Refugees are valued

according to the agendas of the Global North because those countries have the international power to dictate terms of refugee settlement. The Global North is not the primary recipient of Syrian refugees, which must mean that for northern states, these refugees have characteristics (I argue cultural, religious and racial) that negatively impact their value in the perception of the North. This nuance is explicitly shown in the case of Turkey: “The EU [European Union] was reported to have applied pressure on Turkey to keep its borders open but worked quickly to create a network of fences, patrols, and policies to keep the Syrian refugees from entering Europe. Millions were spent on border controls between Turkey and Greece” (Awad, 2013, p.33). The financial cost was evidently not the issue because of the money spent ensuring ‘undesirable’ refugees do not enter Europe. Austerity was used as a rhetorical shield for the real reason that the Global North prefers that Syrian refugees be settled in the Middle East instead of within their own borders. The demographic proportion of immigrants in ‘their’ societies must maintain the power imbalance between minoritized groups and the White majority.

The preoccupation with what rightfully belongs to a state’s citizens is inextricably linked to rhetorics of nationalism. Nationalism is neoliberalism’s theme of individualism performed on an international scale. One can understand the evolution of private property rights into an emphasis on retaining the rights to resources for those considered to have citizenship rights. Nations perceive themselves as only responsible for their own citizens and not necessarily obligated to aid a larger global community. Fiona Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas (2020) reiterate this point: “Liberalism’s political and legal logics are of territorial and juridical closure” (p. 857). Refugees do not fall under the jurisdiction of citizenship with all its rights, privileges, and protections. This argument is especially true for racialized refugees who would change the

demographics of the recipient country. Therefore, they are acted against as threats to the institutionalized whiteness that is considered valuable cultural capital to these countries.

The commodification of people is then implicated in the use of financial aid leveraged upon the acceptance of refugees into Middle Eastern countries. Nations of the Global North and the Global South play different functions in a system that uses the commodification of refugees as a common tool. Adamson and Tsourapas (2020, p. 869) discuss the migration agreements in which the Global North provides monetary aid to the Global South for accepting refugees. The Middle Eastern countries end up settling refugees for a profit, and the Global North happily pays that price while maintaining their neoliberal austerity rhetorics. The Global South is motivated to maximize the number of refugees they process yet the profit motive does not extend to assuring a high quality of life for refugees during the settlement process and after, which is almost completely relegated to the discretion of NGOs. Under global neoliberal politics, people become sources of capital rather than individuals with guaranteed human rights. Turning to Turkey and its interactions with refugee-aid NGOs further demonstrates the ideas of austerity, commodification, individualism, and apoliticalization in the humanitarian sphere.

Section 2: Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Control Without the Cost: The Nexus Between Authoritarianism, Neoliberalism, and NGOs in Turkey

In Turkey, authoritarian government structure, neoliberal economic *and* social policies, and the position of NGOs in society come together in ways that might seem contradictory at first, but in deeper analysis are informed by and facilitate the global neoliberal hegemony. Turkey's

leaders have become more overarchingly authoritarian after World War II. This process of power consolidation was, and continues to be, couched in religious and nationalistic arguments. The military outwardly promotes secularism, modernizing policies, and democracy, while at the same time repeatedly intervening with shows of force against perceived threats to its own power. Though Turkey has multi-party elections, the oppressive shadow of military threat hangs over the system and severely weakens the so-called ‘democracy’ (Atalay, 2018, p. 180). The understanding that the military has the ultimate jurisdiction over politics means that political life in Turkey is narrowly constrained to the path the government espouses. While this does not negate the protest and resistive activities of individuals and groups, to act in those ways is dangerous and curtailed. In fact, Freedom House’s (a non-governmental research and advocacy organization) report on Turkey reflects that freedom of press, assembly, and speech is immensely limited, as any ‘dissidence’ is subject to arbitrary detention (2021). The atmosphere of self-censorship is prevalent and contextualizes the apparent electoral success of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current president of Turkey who has continued to strengthen the authoritarian nature of the country. After being constitutionally limited to two terms as Prime Minister, he was elected to the largely ceremonial position of President in 2014 and transformed it into the sole holder of executive power since introducing a referendum to get rid of the Prime Minister seat.

At first glance, authoritarianism may seem contradictory to the neoliberal emphasis on limited government. One would assume that the enhanced role of the government would inherently prevent the individual freedoms that neoliberalism champions. However, closer inspection reveals that the relationship between authoritarianism and neoliberalism is strong and mutually-beneficial. In Turkey, the dynamic between the two creeds finds a balance:

Starting in its first term, the AKP [the conservative political party of President Erdoğan] government fast-tracked IMF-dictated market discipline and market reforms, privatizing state industries and natural resources, restructuring social security institutions, and commodifying public utilities and services. As part of the economic reform program, the government instituted a new labor regime that facilitated the exploitation of flexible and precarious labor through subcontracting and outsourcing. (Atalay, 2018, p. 176)

Understanding this evident discrepancy in neoliberal ideology and the application of neoliberal policy in Turkey requires a reading of neoliberalism that replaces the ostensible ideological aims of neoliberalism with its actual goals. Rather than attempting to protect and raise up the individual, neoliberalism seeks to consolidate economic and political power within a small group of economic socio-economic elites. Therefore, neoliberal policies, such as those referenced above, increase income disparities and poverty.

In Turkey, NGOs complete neoliberalism's and authoritarianism's triangular relationship. The neoliberal argument for the creation of NGOs was discussed in Section 1 of this paper. To reiterate, the idea of austerity as a fiscal good was transposed to the political/social realm to justify the government not funding social services. The growth of NGOs is a result of this gap, as interviewed civil society employees acknowledge: "The state wants to give its public obligations to civil society. In this way it tries to make civil society its subcontractor – rewards those which are useful for itself" (Mackreath and Sağrıç, 2017, p. 50). The state's active role in delegating its responsibilities to NGOs (as well as choosing which types of NGOs are allowed to form) enables many nation states, including Turkey, to maintain control over civil society. This situation occurs despite the notion that non-governmental organizations are meant, by definition, to reside outside of government purview. For example, Turkey has largely prevented international NGOs from working in the country because of its perception that INGOs are Western actors that seek to

colonize Turkish society. Only more recently, since 2015 or so, have INGOs been permitted to enter the country in greater numbers (Sözer, 2019, p. 18). Essentially, the nexus between authoritarianism, neoliberalism, and NGOs in Turkey is that shifting public services to the private NGO sphere allows the Turkish government to extend authoritarian control without the cost.

Guests Through an Open Door: Turkey's Official/Unofficial Relationship with Syrian Refugees

The paradigm of control without a cost mirrors much of Turkey's relationship with Syrian refugees which is categorized by this official/unofficial dynamic, in other word governing outside of government. Turkey's relationship with Syrian refugees is composed of dual layers of official policy-making and unofficial cultural reasonings that inform that policy. In official documents, Turkey's national government articulates its position towards Syria as an 'open door' meaning that Syrians are allowed into the country and extended protections that are carefully designated 'temporary.' An example of this structural emphasis on temporality is the language the state uses for the refugees. In Turkish law, Syrians are termed 'guests' rather than refugees (Oktav and Çelikaksoy, 2015, p. 415). In effect, the 'guests' do not have to be treated according to international regulations for refugees. The positionality of the government changes based on the language, from obligation to generosity. Rather than being committed to protect 'refugees' directly because of their refugee status, the state is acting beyond its duty in protecting 'guests.' This redefinition of responsibility allows the state to remove facets of refugee protection that are considered excessive. In this way, the designation of 'guests' iterates the neoliberal themes of

austerity (for limiting aid based on Syrian's lack of citizenship status) and apoliticalization (for framing aid through explicitly needs-based and nonpolitical campaigns). However, Syrian settlement in Turkey is largely a permanent proposition and thus Syrians' legal/political status is even more problematic. The Turkish government confines its welfare responsibilities to the 'guest' camps while ninety percent of the Syrian population in Turkey is living outside of camps. The effect of this delineation of responsibility is insidious: "Arguably the Turkish government has, through focusing its funding and resources solely on the refugee camps, sidestepped sensitive issues of 'integration' and inclusion within the wider host community, where the majority of Syrians are living" (Mackreath and Sağnıç, 2017, p. 15). As previously argued, the Turkish state is intentionally apoliticizing its systematic disclusion of Syrians from the body politic and this is furthered by only granting official aid to those in camps, locations where they are inherently othered. When Syrians live outside refugee camps, they are no longer guaranteed any sort of aid besides those offered by local and international NGOs or other civil society organizations. Those organizations are also controlled by the authoritarian government, but the government is not responsible for funding or explicitly supporting those operations. The Turkish state, through neoliberalism doctrines, finds the means for policies that perpetuate ethnic separation.

Why does the Turkish government have this 'open door' policy then, if the way it is implemented demonstrates a desire to limit their responsibility as much as possible? The answer is two-fold: religious sentiment and alternative capital to be gained from refugees. President Erdoğan's political party, the AKP, is a conservative Islamic party that places its rhetoric about Syrian refugees in a decidedly religious context.

Rhetorically, they portrayed Syrian migration to Turkey as a modern-day *hijra*—that is, the historical migration of Prophet Muhammed from Mecca to Medina with his devoted followers—so that they refer to Syrians as *muhacir* (i.e. migrants, referring to Muslim migrants from Mecca) and themselves as *ensar* (i.e. helper, referring to host populations of Medina who welcomed the migrants). (Sözer, 2019, p. 16)

The religious motivations are directly stated to be reasons to accept refugees and also introduce the idea that refugees comprise alternative forms of capital. The argument is thus: helping immigrants entails a religious benefit which grants the government support from its religious citizens. In this way, refugees are a commodified population, stripped down to strategic policy to precipitate electoral success. The government finds religious framing useful for continuing their line of reasoning that helping refugees is charity rather than a responsibility. Charity is then a temporary type of aid which the giver can suspend, limit, or deliver selectively as they see fit. It does not convey onto the recipient any lasting rights or attempt to alter the greatly uneven power dynamic. Charity is a weapon of control and one that masquerades as indisputably moral.

Building on this idea of the commodification of refugees, Syrians represent capital for Turkey on the global scale. Luca Mavelli (2018) counters current scholarship's assertion that human rights doctrines are a rationale for receiving refugees that is independent of neoliberalism run-away economization of all aspects of political/social life:

This argument neglects how forms of inclusion based on human rights, shared humanity, and common solidarity... may have undergone a process of economization and how—given that economization cannot be reduced to monetization—entrepreneurial states may try to maximize not just their economic growth, but their non-monetary and non-economic value. Hence, they may evaluate prospective citizens... as capital that may enhance their cultural, emotional, and reputational value, even if this implies an economic cost. (2018, p. 489)

Turkey leverages its 'open door' policy for Syrian refugees as reputational capital that increases its "normative power" as Oktav and Çelikaksoy (2015, p. 410) phrase it. Normative power is

explained as power within the Middle Eastern region as well as in the European Union, meaning that Turkey seeks to both represent the region and be recognized as the de facto leader within it. To concentrate power, Turkey must install itself as the paragon of Islamic humanitarianism by positioning itself in Western perceptions as an acceptable alternative to extremist Islamic governments. The other international role Turkey seeks is as the chief player in diplomacy, achieved by navigating the balance between cooperating with Western objectives while advancing its own ambitions, which are partly improved by a reputation of refuting the European Union and Western ideals (Oktav and Çelikaksoy, 2015, p. 410 and Boşnak, 2021, p. 304). The ‘open door’ policy towards Syrian refugees situates Turkey in partnership with the European Union and establishes Turkey as a dominant actor in the Syrian refugee crisis (because they accept almost half of all Syrian refugees)—effects that augment Turkey’s normative power. Thus, refugees are commodified to make up in political capital the economic capital lost in accepting them, meaning that Turkey’s role in the Syrian refugee crisis concurs with the neoliberal tenet of austerity through the applied tenets of apolitical commodification.

The Effects Reflect the Cause: Neoliberal Themes in NGOs’ Management of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Neoliberal themes have been demonstrated in the context of Turkey’s government, policies, and NGOs. It is now prudent to examine how neoliberalism emerges in the work that international non-governmental organizations do in Turkey. The premise of austerity limits the efficacy of NGOs because they are treating symptoms, not the disease. Austerity in NGOs may be disguised as efficiency measures because they are targeting a specific sub-population of

refugees, thus providing aid to a smaller number of people. Additionally, austerity is framed in Turkey as an equitable practice because the NGOs are aiding those who are especially disadvantaged. Sözer (2019, p. 20) elaborates on the problematic notions behind the vulnerability categorizations that are the standard for international non-governmental organizations. When NGOs use labels like, ‘more than ordinarily vulnerable,’ they sidestep the reality that they create categories of refugees. These categories then allow them to designate some refugees as ‘acceptably’ vulnerable and thus not necessitating assistance. Rather than helping all refugees, who share a base level of vulnerability, categorizations permit NGOs to justify aiding only those they define as most vulnerable. Sözer (2020) underscores that aid becomes, “not a right but a privilege, ‘a prized status’” (p. 2169).

The ‘prized status’ is not without its own issues that stem directly from the neoliberal concept of austerity. Austerity favors needs-based instead of rights-based activities. A social service described as a need is considered charitable aid. Therefore, it is more open to interpretation when the actor in charge of distributing aid feels that people are no longer needy. Meanwhile, a right is more guaranteed and meant to be assured in perpetuity. Straightforward material assistance does not protect Syrians’ human rights because it does not actually work to solve the causes of vulnerability, merely to mediate them. Sözer (2020) corroborates, “[material assistance] attempts to address only the ‘treatable’ forms of vulnerability (in fact without actually treating them) and ignores the rest” (p. 2171). Needs-based aid at the expense of rights-based aid curtails the overall benefit that NGOs can achieve because they do not attack the roots of refugees’ vulnerabilities but instead accept responsibility for managing just a portion of the vulnerability they observe.

The commodification of people is not only ubiquitous and unquestioned but also actively promoted by aid groups. The vulnerability classifications discussed above are used to simplify, even mechanize, the process of deciding who should receive aid. For example, indicators for economic vulnerability that a framework may look for are the proportion of elderly/disabled members of a family in comparison to the able-bodied members (Sözer, 2020, p. 2171). The simplicity of this analysis of people's work comes down to an externally imposed perception of whether or not a Syrian is capable of generating economic value. The attempt to more easily distinguish between vulnerable-enough and ordinarily vulnerable refugees utilizes an economic lens of people's worth, based on their perceived ability to participate in capitalistic society. The point of reference is not in the additional needs that they have, but their lacking ability to leverage themselves for capital. Those refugees who cannot successfully commodify themselves for consumption in the labor market are being equally but oppositely commodified for aid.

This commodification is reinforced by the donor model in which NGOs operate. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees employs a Vulnerability Assessment Framework to make its aid decisions. The primary goal of this framework is document changes in refugees' vulnerability over time which is used to create budgets, proposals, and donor reports (Sözer, 2020, p. 2172). The framework's stated goals subtextually assert that the real necessity for the framework is to systemize the aid decision process to make it easy to represent numerically, and thus explain to donors how their money is being used. The goal of NGOs becomes to demonstrate quantifiable outcomes which reduces the people served to numbers and takes the humanity out of humanitarianism.

In order to continue to receive donations, NGOs pursue refugees whom they can fit into the narrow 'extremely vulnerable' category they created. The refugees in this category appeal to donors as attractive uses for their money. In practice, the very process of commodifying/systemizing this process makes aid delivery less advantageous for the refugee. Frameworks of vulnerability assign numerical values to attributes of perceived vulnerability. Quantifying vulnerability based on certain factors but not others means that a refugee family can score a number of points that is below the requisite threshold for receiving aid even if their experience is precarious and they are legitimately requesting aid. The delineation of those deserving of aid based on quantified vulnerability retains an arbitrariness from the biases of those who created the vulnerability framework. For the refugees, vulnerability is a harmful concept that restricts aid rather than increases it. It is incapable of responding to nuanced situations that have not been specifically incorporated into the framework's decision process. In spite of all of these consequences, NGOs promote the commodification of people because it benefits them in the donor system they engage in within their neoliberalism-dominated societies.

The ideology of individualism is shaping aid policies both on inter-organizational and organizational levels. Neoliberalism's love of the individual responsibility doctrine to justify people's successes and failures translates to an intrinsic focus on individualism for NGOs. Mackreath and Sağrıç (2017) identify competition between NGOs for national and international funding, status, location-specific information, resources in-site, and reputation. As each NGO strives to work independently in order to expand its stock of these forms of capital, they are not able to collaborate with each other to actually maximize their humanitarian efforts.

The competition among NGOs becomes so ingrained that they then implement aid distribution models that foment competition among the people they serve. NGOs directly dictate the value of certain lives and redistribute capital along social as well as economic lines, often devaluing one at the expense of the other. Economic vulnerability is the impetus for aid which correspondingly increases a Syrian refugee's financial capital. However, receiving aid when other refugees do not heightens competition and decreases the social capital that is gained from strong interpersonal relationships with their host community (Sözer, 2020, p. 2169). The positive work done by NGOs is thus tainted by the problematic values they espouse in the process. As actors in the hegemonic neoliberal system, they enact, knowingly or otherwise, neoliberal ideologies that end up harming the people they aim to help.

The systemized apoliticalization of refugee management by non-governmental organizations promotes othering and a form of ethnic segregation. In Turkey, only 10% of Syrian refugees reside in refugee camps while the other 90% have settled in cities across the country. The Turkish government refuses to provide social services to Syrians outside the camps and provides partial services to those in camps. NGOs are thus solely responsible for providing services to 90% of all Syrian refugees in Turkey. The positionality of the government in this situation makes a statement that refugees are under the jurisdiction of outsiders, thus designating Syrians as outsiders. Syrians are not included in the body politic and that the government has no real responsibility for or interest in their wellbeing. Represented as simply an aid distribution model that happens to rely on non-governmental organizations, Turkey then does not need to overtly state their relationship with Syrian refugees in a political context to have this effect. As

an apolitical dynamic, this form of othering and ethnic segregation is more difficult to oppose because it blends into the cultural background of Turkey.

Ten years into the Syrian refugee crisis, Syrians have intertwined and deep relationships with their host communities. Despite these ties, their official citizenship and sense of belonging are far from secure. Even when Syrian refugees and Turkish natives have the same vulnerabilities, for example economic stress or food insecurity, refugees and Turkish natives are segregated by the entity that is supposed to mediate those vulnerabilities (Sözer, 2019, p. 8). Syrians must turn to NGOs while the other members of their host community turn to the Turkish state. This ethnic segregation is especially harmful because NGOs as the providers of aid are precarious: they can be banned by the Turkish state as international NGOs recently were, they can run out of donor support, and they can shift focus to a different refugee crisis elsewhere in the world. Neoliberalism was the impetus for the growth of the non-governmental sector in providing aid. It is within this neoliberal context that these organizations are validated to promote unsustainable and problematic policies.

Conclusion

My research solidifies the connection between neoliberalism and the NGOs currently managing the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey. The relationship goes both ways. Neoliberalism's tenets of austerity, commodification, individualism, and apoliticalization cause the primacy of NGOs in handling the crisis, and in turn shape the policies and procedures those NGOs implement. Critical theory provides the foundational lens for interrogating neoliberalism which, in its hegemonic position in the world, influences all of our governments, politics, systems,

structures, and lives. NGOs are no different, and any perception that humanitarianism inherently counters neoliberalism is yet another way that neoliberalism has co-opted these institutions.

Austerity, commodification, individualism, and apoliticalization work together in a myriad of demonstrated ways to control the number of Syrian refugees welcomed into Turkey. A balance is struck between diminishing social services and maximizing the reputational capital to be gained from the refugees. Above all, neoliberalism seeks to present itself as neutral, sensible, normative, essential, and apolitical. In such a light, neoliberal ideology seems so much more unchangeable and necessary to the public.

The research demonstrates how neoliberalism caused the Syrian Civil War and the political structure Syrian refugees find themselves navigating in Turkey. Neoliberalism guides the global decision-making of who is responsible for Syrian refugees and what the acceptable practices are for waiving that responsibility. In summation, neoliberalism normalizes the understanding that the government should have control without the cost. In Turkey, labeling Syrian refugees as ‘guests’ places them in precarious situations. NGOs provide the vast majority of refugee assistance. Yet the NGO system for delivering aid perpetuates unethical themes of commodification, individualism, and ethnic separation.

Future Research

This analysis is a starting point, but also presents avenues for future research. It would be beneficial to compare neoliberalism’s relationship with NGOs dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis in other countries that are in the Middle East and the Global North. Beyond the specific context of Turkey, neoliberalism appears in distinct ways in different economic, political, and

government systems, and so its relationship with NGOs likely transmutes accordingly. As a researcher living in Massachusetts, USA, I am particularly interested in the way that neoliberalism influences local non-profits, a topic that commonly escapes scrutiny.

It is also vital to consider what would change or remain the same when studying more rights-based or local NGOs in contrast to the international and needs-based NGOs. Neoliberalism's broad role in encouraging the growth of NGOs raises the question of how it interplays with other types of NGOs besides refugee aid. For instance, how intertwined are neoliberalism and NGOs whose work focuses on women's rights, education, or healthcare? Even remaining on the topic of refugee aid NGOs, the range of potential research is vast. An inquiry I do not engage in this paper is how the demographics of the refugee population in comparison to their host country would presumably have a significant impact on the way the NGOs work with them. For Syrian refugees in Turkey, race is not perceived to be a division between the refugees and the host community. However, racial differences are definitely a factor for African refugees (for example from Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic) in Turkey or countries of the Global North. Neoliberalism and racism themselves have an intricate and self-perpetuating relationship. By looking at that aspect of refugee management by NGOs, another level of analysis could be added.

Parting Thoughts

The purpose of this research is not to call for the abolishment of all NGOs on the basis that their work is flawed and, at this time, embedded into the hegemonic neoliberal ideology. Instead, I argue that changes in policy and procedures are crucial. It is my hope that by naming

the neoliberalism framework in which refugee NGOs operate, those of us that donate to, validate, and admire those NGOs can realize how neoliberal tenets are undermining humanitarian efforts. This realization, coupled with the knowledge that public support allows NGOs to continue their work, opens an opportunity to advocate for NGO policies that will consciously refute these neoliberal tendencies. A concentrated drive to purge the humanitarian sector of neoliberal ideologies facilitates the greater struggle to restrict, depower, and oppose neoliberalism in all sectors of our political systems. By doing so, we can create a pathway towards a more equitable, sustainable, and humane world.

References

- Turkey: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report. (2021). Retrieved December 7, 2021, from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2021>
- Adamson, F., & Tsourapas, G. (2019). The migration state in the Global South: Nationalizing, developmental, and neoliberal models of migration management. *International Migration Review*, 54(3), 853–882. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319879057>
- Alexander, J., & Fernandez, K. (2020). The impact of neoliberalism on civil society and nonprofit advocacy. *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, 12(2), 367–394. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2020-0016>
- Atalay, Z. (2018). Authoritarian neoliberalism and Islamist civil society in Turkey. In *Civil Society in the Global South* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315113579-11/authoritarian-neoliberalism-islamist-civil-society-turkey-zeynep-atalay>
- Awad, I. (2014). Population movements in the aftermath of the Arab awakening: the Syrian refugee crisis between regional factors and state interest. In O. Grech, & M. Wohlfeld (Eds.), *Migration in the Mediterranean: Human Rights, Security, and Development Perspectives* (pp. 24-39). MSIDA: Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies.
- Boşnak, B. (2021). Politics of subsidiarity in refugee reception: The case of civil society in Turkey. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 19(3), 301-315.
doi:10.1080/15562948.2021.1951417

Brown, W. (2016), *Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics*. *CONSTELLATIONS*, 23, 3-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12166>

Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kargin, A. (2018). The unending Arab Spring in Syria: The primary dynamics of the Syrian Civil War as experienced by Syrian refugees. *Turkish Studies*, 13(3), 27–48. <https://doi.org/10.7827/TurkishStudies.13158>

Mackreath, H., & Sağnıç, Ş. (2017). *Civil Society and Syrian Refugees in Turkey* (1st ed.). Citizens' Assembly-Turkey.

Mavelli, L. (2018). Citizenship for sale and the neoliberal political economy of belonging. *International Studies Quarterly*, 62, 482–493. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy004>

Oktav, Ö. Z., & Çelikaksoy, A. (2015). The Syrian refugee challenge and Turkey's quest for normative power in the Middle East. *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 70(3), 408–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702015584305>

Sözer, H. (2019). Categories that blind us, categories that bind them: The deployment of vulnerability notions for Syrian refugees in Turkey. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez020/5396704>

Sözer, H. (2020). Humanitarianism with a neo-liberal face: Vulnerability intervention as vulnerability redistribution. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(11), 2163–2180.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1573661>