
IN THEIR OWN VOICES: UNACCOMPANIED MINOR ASYLUM SEEKERS IN TÜRKİYE

Refugee
Rights
Türkiye

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Foreword

Refugee Rights Türkiye (Mülteci Hakları Merkezi in Turkish) is an independent NGO based in Istanbul that provides specialized legal counselling and assistance services to refugees and asylum seekers in Türkiye; delivers trainings, reference materials and other types of expertise support to lawyers and legal practitioners on refugee law and Turkish asylum procedures; advocates for improvements in Türkiye's asylum legislation and policies in line with international standards; and engages local communities and public opinion to encourage solidarity and positive attitudes towards persons escaping war and persecution and seeking legal protection and long term integration in Türkiye.

Türkiye has recently been hosting a historic mass influx of protection seekers. Currently, there are close to 4 million refugees from neighboring Syria. In addition, there are hundreds of thousands of protection seekers from countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia. There is also an irregular movement continuing via Türkiye to Europe. Amongst these irregular migrants are those fleeing war and persecution as well as those escaping for economic reasons.

Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers who find themselves in another country to seek protection without parents and family members constitute a very peculiar group within the overall migration and asylum dynamic. The number of unaccompanied asylum seekers in Türkiye has also increased significantly in the last years. Most of these children come to Türkiye from Afghanistan and Syria. Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Türkiye have the right to benefit from legal protection in line with Türkiye's obligations concerning relevant international law and also as per Law on Foreigners and International Protection (Law No. 6458). Underaged children who have either arrived Türkiye without their parents, families and caretakers or became unaccompanied while in Türkiye are placed at facilities under the authority of Ministry of Family and Social Policies and the procedures concerning their asylum applications in Türkiye are being taken care of by the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM).

As Refugee Rights Türkiye, we provide various types of legal counselling and support services for this vulnerable group of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. As part of our work, we have had the chance to learn from them their experiences in Türkiye, the challenges they faced in their countries of origin, their attempts to rebuild their lives after coming to Türkiye and their dreams and plans about the future.

We have prepared this publication in order to help the stories, experiences and dreams of these children to become more visible and be known by the wider public in Türkiye. The following 15 testimonies are experiences by unaccompanied children who are still under state protection in Türkiye or by ex-minors who have recently turned 18 and are in transition to adulthood. At the end of each testimony, there is either the pseudonym or initials chosen by the owner of the testimony. We have prepared these testimonies with the answers we received from them and anonymized all personal details shared with us.

We hope that this publication, which we have prepared with the generous support of Swiss Embassy in Ankara, will serve to strengthen the solidarity and support for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Türkiye whose experiences deserve special awareness and care.

Refugee Rights Türkiye



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My family left Afghanistan and became refugees in Iran, long before I was born. I was born in Iran where it was very difficult to live as a refugee. It was very difficult and very expensive to obtain a residence permit, to go to school, to do anything. Afghans were not allowed to go to university. They were treated very badly. This is how I realized at a very young age that I would not have a future in Iran. I also had problems with my family for various reasons, so I fled to Türkiye when I was fourteen.

The smuggler who brought me to Türkiye locked me in his house for three months while he reached my family for the rest of the money he had asked from me. I stayed in a damp room and I could not eat properly during those three months. One day I took advantage of a confusion and run from the house. I lived in the streets for a while. Then thanks to an Afghan kid I met I found out about how to register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Following my registration with the United Nations I was placed in a state shelter for unaccompanied minors since I was under eighteen. I spent my first months in Türkiye in ambiguity and fear but I felt safe again once I began to stay at the shelter.

My initial experience at the shelter was not easy at all, however. There were times when I felt lonely, when I felt miserable. To distract myself at such times I spent time with my friends, prayed and attended an English language course.

In Iran I studied until the second year of high school and I was two years ahead of my peers since I had attended summer school for three years in a row. I have been in Türkiye for almost five years now and unfortunately I could not continue my education here. I have not been able to complete my school registration due to an issue that has long been going on regarding my ID document. Nevertheless, I learned Turkish grammar well thanks to my teacher at the shelter and improved my Turkish since I have friends to practice with. During my time at the shelter I also took swimming and sports classes and attended an English language course at TÖMER, from which I was awarded a certificate.

When I turned eighteen and moved out from the shelter, I was told by the authorities to move to a province in Anatolia. I applied to be sent to one remote province where I had friends from the shelter staying, and I was assigned that province. After I settled there, however, my friends moved to other countries irregularly and suddenly I had nobody I knew left in that city. So I came back to Istanbul. I will have to return to my satellite city soon because I am under an obligation to do so, but I am very worried. I think constantly about how I can move to that city and make a living while I know nobody there. I am currently trying to save money while working at temporary jobs as waiter and interpreter.

Following my status determination interview with the United Nations I was recognized as a refugee and my file has been referred to the United States for resettlement. **I have been waiting for my interview with ICMC for about a year now. I never attempted to cross irregularly because it is a dangerous journey. I considered it when I first arrived in Turkey but gave up after I learned how dangerous it can be. Besides, it gives me hope that the process of resettlement in the USA is progressing, albeit slowly.**

My dream now is to settle in America with the help of the United Nations, continue to pursue my education there and improve my English... I have friends who have been resettled in the USA and I am in constant contact with them and try to understand what kind of a life they lead there. I want to start a secure life one day for myself, too.

M., 19, Afghanistan

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I am a nineteen-year-old Afghan refugee. I have no family in Türkiye other than my seventeen-year-old brother and my aunt. My aunt cannot stay with us due to her health issues and financial conditions and lives in an institution in another city where she stays with other women like her. We have been in Türkiye since 2012.

We lived in a small village in Afghanistan. The Taliban was very strong there and there was even another terrorist group. On their way from one area to another they would stop by our village and racketeering. Since it was a remote village, the state was unable to protect it enough. I remember often hearing gun fire and clashes and waiting inside our home in fear. In addition, in our village the oldest male of every household had to fight. My father left, too, and he never returned and we never heard from him again. Around the same time my uncle and his family fled abroad and they are in Australia now. My mother, my siblings and I stayed behind. They considered having my brothers and me smuggled from Afghanistan so that we would not have to fight as children. My aunt in Iran came and took us to Iran. My mother could not come with us and we have never heard from her to this day. My siblings and I lived in Iran for five or six years. Then due to the problems we had to endure in Iran, particularly the fact that we would not be able to continue our education, we moved forward to Türkiye. My two brothers and my other aunt are still in Iran. It is sad that we had to leave separately; I miss them.

My younger sibling, my aunt and I came to Türkiye via irregular routes in the summer of 2012. The smuggler took us to Istanbul. We stayed in Zeytinburnu for five or six months. Then, the police took my sibling and me to the institution where we stay now after our passports were found to be fake when we were in the airport to travel to Australia to join my uncle.

I remember very well the cold day the Child Police came to pick us up and placed us in the shelter. Both my brother and I felt cold and nervous. My brother is two years younger than me, so I was thirteen and he was eleven. We both were afraid because we did not know what was waiting for us. We could not hear from my aunt, either, so we spent those days in great anxiety. Then we started to explore the shelter and got to know our friends here.

Personally speaking, it took me very long to get used to the shelter. In the first place, I did not speak a word of Turkish; and my English was very poor when we first came here. I was constantly sleeping in my first days because I did not feel like doing anything else. Psychologists from one NGO would sometimes come to the shelter. They asked to see me and I received help from them for over a year. It took more than a year for me to adapt to the shelter. I had great difficulty making friends.

It was much harder to register at school when I first came here than it is now. Registration became easier over time and I see that if children arriving at the shelter want to go to school, they no longer encounter much difficulty. When I first came and wanted to go to school, around 2012 or 2013, I was told to learn Turkish first, perhaps because there were not many refugee children back then. The Provincial Directorate of Migration Management did not exist either, instead the Foreigners' Police took care of our affairs and it took me very long to obtain my ID document. Later, I was told that I needed to provide my old transcripts and obtain an equivalency certificate for these transcripts before I could register at school. How was I supposed to bring transcripts while I fled from my country? Anyway, I tried hard and eventually managed to obtain some of the necessary documents. For all these reasons, I could continue my education with delay.

I started ninth grade here. My adaptation to life in Türkiye of course became faster with school. But then in tenth grade I could not pull myself together and never went to school in the second term, which was spring 2015. Back then many of my friends at the shelter were chasing a deal with a smuggler to cross to Europe. **Since we had seen that an option like being recognized as a refugee by the United Nations and being resettled in a third country was becoming virtually impossible,**

it seemed to us that the only solution would be to make a deal with a smuggler. Many friends I loved dearly left and fled. One is in Finland, another is in Switzerland, and some others are in Germany now.

I, too, attempted to cross to Europe irregularly once when my friends were all gone. I could not take my sibling with me because he was very little. With some forty to fifty others who risked their lives to make this dangerous journey, I got on an 8-meter boat in the Aegean. The engine broke down half an hour after we sailed off. We could not move forward or backward. Everyone was in great panic and fear and worried that we would be intercepted by the Coast Guard. Then a fishermen's boat saw us and drove us back to shore on the Turkish side. We were lucky to get off that boat before any of us got hurt. I never considered fleeing again. Not only was I scared but I also regretted having left my sibling and my aunt behind. Nevertheless, a friend who was with me in that attempt took another chance later and is in Finland now. After this incident I decided to put my heart and soul into school, concentrated on my classes and raised my GPA.

During my first year at school I suffered great hardship due to the language barrier. I got bad results on tests, especially in subjects like Turkish, literature and history. I studied hard but could not possibly understand the subjects well. I was lucky that my teachers showed me understanding. They gave me performance assignments rather than written assignments so that I could handle them. I went on to select the Turkish-Math class because I am good at math. I still ask to be assigned homework in literature classes. My sibling and I were the only foreigners in the school we first attended. The other students were surprised to see us and could not understand why we were

in Turke. As I said earlier, our teachers happened to be very understanding. I can say that I did not meet one single bad person at school. Nobody ostracised us for being Afghan, so I felt lucky in that sense. I attended a different school in the first year and I had to switch to another school when it was turned into an all-girls school. I like my current school better because I get along with my teachers here better. Perhaps this is in fact because I have overcome the language barrier now. In my first school I did not understand everything my teachers said but I did not let that be noticed. I hope they never said anything bad.

When I first came here, the shelter was like a family home. The number of children staying at the shelter rose with time so that there is too much hustle now with new children constantly coming in and moving out in a very short period of time. We had quite a lot of fun at the shelter when we were fourteen or fifteen years old. We were like a family since it was always the same kids. Although we sometimes gave our teachers at the shelter a hard time with our behaviour, I know that they loved us, too. However, neither we nor our teachers can get used to kids coming to stay at the shelter for only a few days, weeks or months.

I am one of those who have stayed the longest, so I am like an older brother and an interpreter at the shelter. Thanks to my Turkish language teacher at the shelter, I am going to take an exam at TÖMER to obtain a Turkish language competency certificate. This way I am going to have a document to work as a professional interpreter in the future.

My primary goal is to get into university now. I registered for a private course to prepare for the university entrance exam for foreign people. I attend this course regularly and also work with voluntary mentors who help us prepare for this exam. There will be eighty questions in the exam: forty general aptitude questions, thirty math and ten geometry.

I would like to study interior design at university. I also want to do sports while studying at university. **I have been going to a taekwondo school for three or four years and my teachers think that I am good enough to join competitions in the future. They even tried to get me an athletic license but we found out that that I am ineligible for it with the type of ID document I have been given. My teachers tell me that I am good at taekwondo. I find it hard to take that I have talent in something but all doors are closed to me.** I just hope that I can get a license some other way, for instance, if I can get into the university team.

I took an interest in playing the guitar and we had volunteers coming to the shelter to teach us, but since this never became a regular thing I could not learn it well. I attend a summer school on volleyball and swimming every summer.

The status of my UN file is a bit complicated. We are waiting to be resettled. My brother and I are going to school and got used to life in Turkey. My brother is studying graphical design at a vocational high school and will do an internship next year. Life is hard for my aunt, however. She resides in her satellite city and cannot travel outside it very often. Our only problem with living in Turkey is that we cannot travel outside the country even as a tourist. I have two siblings in Iran. If I could go visit them, that would be enough for me.

Everybody gets a different impression when they first come to the shelter we stay at. Most do not like it and I find this a little ungrateful. I do not know whether they come from a better place but I have always liked both the dorm and Turkey because I came here to save my life and I can go to school here. Of course, it also has to do with age. It is an advantage to come at a younger age. It is harder to get used to for a seventeen-year-old because it is harder to register for school, because they cannot speak the language etc.

I consider moving to a university dorm when I have to leave here. My friends who moved out from the shelter usually share an apartment. Our teachers at the shelter have been helpful to them about furniture and rent.

I find it wearisome and sad that I am away from my family. People say that having been away from my family I have matured through pain and grown into a strong person. They try to give me hope by telling me “now, you know what kind of a world we live in”. I say, “OK. Got that. But that’s not exactly a relief.” I got used to this. It is important for you to keep yourself busy. I was depressed before I started school. I was constantly in bed. I got used to life here thanks to school, sports, psychological help, friends and my teachers at the shelter and I now like living in Turkey. My biggest goal is to go to university and I am so close to it. If developments take place about my athletic license and my right to travel internationally, I will have no reservations regarding spending my life here.

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M., 19, Afghanistan





I am a nineteen-year-old young refugee from Somalia living in Istanbul. I came to Turkey in 2012. There is an environment of war and instability in Somalia that began long before I was born. I had to flee from my country for my safety and to receive a better education.

My parents, my siblings and I used to live near the city of Kismayo in Somalia. My father was a farmer. Our financial circumstances were not very good. When my father was killed by a terrorist organization in 2012, my mother had to send my older brother and me abroad because being a boy in Somalia meant getting involved in war from a very early age. There was a chance that something would happen to you if you just wandered around idly. For this reason, my brother and I used the help of a smuggler to leave Somalia and go to Syria. We stayed in Syria for six months. It was hard for us to spend six months in a place that was even more dangerous than Somalia. We stayed in Damascus in Syria. The war had just begun in the country then. The smuggler kept us in a house. We were a group of almost twenty. We did not go out often. After we stayed in Damascus for a while, we first went to Aleppo and then crossed the Turkish border. It was quite a difficult journey for us. We entered Turkey at Hatay and then came to Istanbul. Most people we came along with had people they knew in Istanbul, but we were very young and did not know anyone. The smuggler left us in Fatih. We met a guy from Somalia in the streets and he was very helpful. He hosted us for three days and then took us to the United Nations office. The officers at the United Nations helped us find a place in a shelter in Istanbul. After we made a challenging journey, we finally had a safe place to stay.

My brother and I initially had a lot of difficulty at the shelter. Nevertheless, at the end of every difficulty comes a time of ease. There was one more Somalian kid in the shelter and he was very helpful to us. We first focused on learning the language. We started to speak it at the end of six months. I must say that learning a language is a process, so while I can express myself in Turkish comfortably now I continue to improve it. After we learned the language, we asked our teachers at the shelter if we could go to school. They told us that it was possible but we first needed to have our old transcripts brought from Somalia. It was quite a challenge but we eventually managed to have them brought from Somalia and start school ten months after we moved to the shelter.

I started tenth grade here. It did not take me long to get used to the shelter. We were probably the first Somalians ever to attend our first school here. After I finished high school, I took the artistic aptitude exam at Bahçeşehir University and got admitted to their department of photography. I love photography and would like to pursue it professionally, so I enrolled in the program with great enthusiasm. I was first awarded full financial aid but it was cut down to a fifty percent later because I am a foreigner. My school expenses are covered by a teacher I like who used to do voluntary work at our shelter. While I am not a minor anymore I am exceptionally allowed to continue to stay at the dorm because I go to university. I studied for a year at the preparatory school in the English language and I am a freshman now. My classes currently are not going very well. It is not difficult to follow the lectures, and they are not difficult subjects. But I do not feel very comfortable living in a shelter and this shows in my school performance. I have a bad sleep pattern. I have difficulty falling asleep at night. I often wake up at three in the morning. I feel grateful to my teachers at the shelter for the efforts they showed in getting my right to stay at the shelter extended. They love us and we love them. But life at the shelter is far from ideal for somebody studying at university. There is too much of a hustle at the shelter with a lot of people coming in and moving out every day. So I cannot always find the peaceful environment I need to study for my university courses.

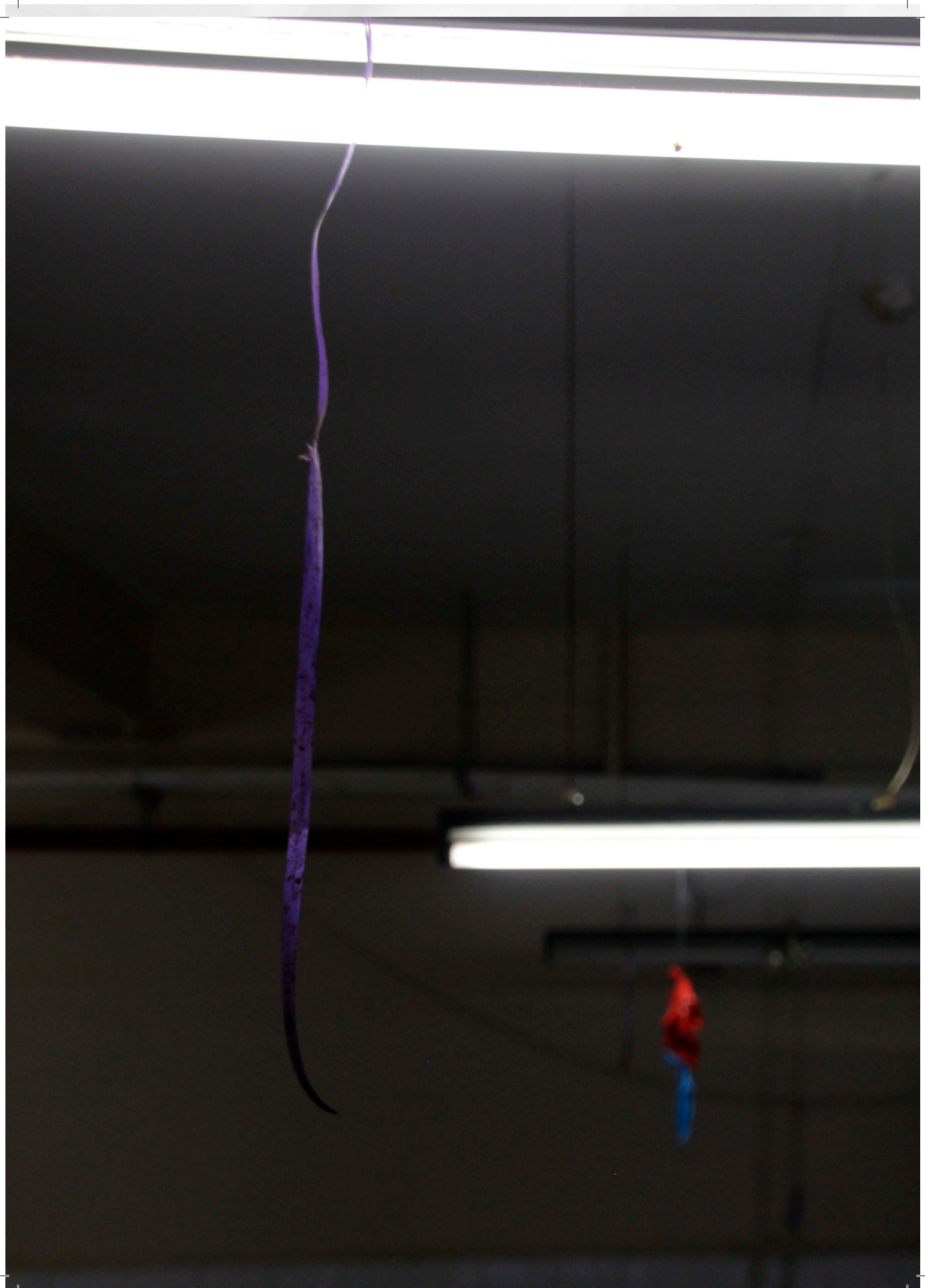
Among my future goals are to complete my university education successfully and go to a university in a different country for a master's degree and to take pictures I like and share them with other people. I do not want to go to other countries via irregular routes. My brother attempted to go irregularly a year ago and was successful but I do not plan to make the same dangerous journey. Everybody has different choices in life. Some people try such routes to go to other countries. My dream is to live in another country, too, but I want it to come true in a legal

way. **I have beautiful dreams for the future but I find it difficult to realize them in Turkey. To say the least, I do not even have freedom of travel inside Turkey. I must get a permission to travel from one city to another.** I sometimes run into issues when I want to see a doctor at a hospital. On my last visit I was told that I did not have insurance since I was not a minor anymore. I could only solve this problem later with the help of a teacher from the shelter. I must renew my ID every six months. If sometimes my name is misspelled, it may take very long just to have it corrected. I constantly run into ID checks in Istanbul and I have to carry with me all the time an ID document that is not even wallet-size. Whenever I run into an ID check, I get panicked fearing that I have forgotten to take my ID with me. I sometimes think that if I did not seek asylum here, if I came here as a tourist with a passport, I would perhaps have felt much more comfortable and have different opportunities. While I can continue my education and I love my friends and teachers at the shelter, I know the difficulties of being an asylum seeker in Turkey very well. However, I still do not consider going to another country irregularly, I may not be even able to have my diploma accepted there before anything else.

If I can fulfill my dream to study for a master's degree in another country, I would like to focus on a particular area and specialize. Otherwise, my desire is to be able to establish a movie production company or an advertising agency. I try to save myself from depression as much as I can and always look ahead. I hope I will reach my dreams one day.

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A., 18, Somalia





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My mother, my father, my older brother, my three younger siblings and I came to Turkey from Afghanistan in 2015. I was around fourteen or fifteen years old back then and did not understand very well why we came here. My parents told us that we did so in order to have a better and safer life. We reached Turkey through Iran. We had to wait in a mountainous area close to the border with barely anything to eat or drink for three days because we wanted to cross irregularly. After we crossed the border, we stayed in Van for a few days and then came to Istanbul. We initially stayed at our relatives' place in Istanbul but then we were able to rent a house in Zeytinburnu. My brother, my father and I worked in a textile workshop in Zeytinburnu. I first found the job hard since I had never done anything like that before, but I got used to it after fifteen or twenty days.

Less than a month after our arrival, my parents were sentenced to imprisonment because of a family-related incident that took place in Turkey. Following this, the police placed my older brother and me in one shelter and my three other siblings to another shelter intended for younger children. I could only visit my siblings about four months after I moved into the shelter. I can visit my parents and my siblings every month now.

When I first got into the shelter, I continued to work for a while. In the second or third month of my placement at the shelter, I registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and then had a status determination interview with them, as a result of which I obtained refugee status. About seven or eight months ago the UNHCR decided to refer my file to the UK for third country resettlement. A series of interviews were held with me and my siblings. My parents, who are in prison, are currently being interviewed regarding our resettlement, too. I try not to think about this process too often because it is so unclear and I do not know when it will be finalized.

I entered the shelter in 2015 but I could only start school this year. In the beginning I did not want to go to school myself, either, since I did not feel like doing anything at all. I used to wake up in the morning and sit doing nothing until the evening. One friend at the shelter taught me how to play the guitar and I kept playing it for ten months. Apart from that, I did judo at a fitness center near the shelter. I even wanted to join judo competitions but I was told that I needed to get an athletic license and that I was ineligible for it with the type of ID document I had. As a result, I could not join the competitions. You run into difficulty about everything in Turkey when you are not a national.

I study at eleventh grade now and I am the only foreigner in the class. I have some difficulty understanding the lectures. **I have been going to school for three or four months now but I could not make any friends yet. They treat me well and try to make friends with me but we still cannot quite be friends, perhaps because of cultural differences. My closest friends are still my friends at the shelter. Maybe we are better friends because we can understand each other better.** My teachers at school treat me well, too, but I am not very successful at my classes. There is one year left of high school. I might take the university entrance exam for foreign students next year. I would like to study arts. If this does not work, I plan to take the artistic aptitude exam and get into a conservatory.

If the UNHCR resettles me to the UK, my life will become easier. Otherwise, I do not know what I will do here. I would like to join a basketball club and play guitar in the UK. I also want to go to university. I feel sorry for my family but there is nothing I can do for them. I will soon turn eighteen. I would like to make plans for the future but this is not something that is totally up to me. Everything will be shaped depending on whether I can move to the UK.

H., 17, Afghanistan

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I am an eighteen-year-old boy from Syria who arrived in Turkey in September 2016 from the city of Aleppo due to the war and moved to the UK in December 2017. I went to Turkey with my younger brother and our neighbors. I used to live in Aleppo with my brother and sister, who are both younger than me, and our father. Our parents divorced ten years ago. My mother lived with her family. We, the children, stayed with our father, who did not allow us to see our mother. We learned from our neighbors later that our mother first went to Turkey and then to the UK. We made contact with our mother with the help of our neighbors. We were already aware that a lot of people we knew, including friends and family, had left Syria because of the war. One day my brother and I heard, while at school, that our house got damaged by a bomb explosion. We directly went to stay with our neighbors that day and went to Turkey with them a short while later. I do not know what happened to our father and sister and whether they are still alive.

It was not easy for us to reach Turkey. We had to wait somewhere close to the border for about twenty days before we crossed. We arrived in Kilis via illegal routes. After a ten-day stay there we went to Istanbul. We went to our uncle's place in Istanbul and stayed there for a while, but since his house was small and he was not in a good financial situation he took us to a nearby hostel run by a person from Syria. My brother and I decided to work to pay the monthly 200 lira rent. I worked in a workshop producing medical materials with my uncle; and my brother worked in a shoe workshop with our uncle-in-law.

The hostel we stayed at was not very safe. Theft was common. My brother and I would only go there to sleep as we had to work all day long and would usually be too tired to do anything else. I would work from eight thirty in the morning to six thirty in the evening. My brother would start at eight thirty in the morning but he would not be done before seven or eight in the evening. **This was not a difficult job but did not pay enough at all to make a living in Istanbul. We did not do much besides work in Istanbul.** We only had one day off every week, which we would spend seeing our Syrian friends. It was hard not speaking the language. I started learning Turkish only a little at the place I worked.

It took us a little long to complete our temporary protection registration because we were in Istanbul where too many Syrians were already waiting to be registered, so we could only receive our ID documents two months before we moved to the UK. During this process, we were also told we would perhaps not be given ID because we were underage and did not have our parents with us. So we were quite scared. It did not turn out to be true, however. Maybe things became easier because our grandmother was with us and accompanied us in affairs relating to registration.

When we arrived in Turkey our aim was to go to the UK to join our mother. My mother contacted an organization providing refugees with legal support in the UK and started a family reunification process. That organization contacted Refugee Rights Türkiye. in Istanbul for us to receive support in our visa application process. The visa application process was quite a challenge. We first made an appointment with the British Consulate in Istanbul and Refugee Rights Turkey helped us gather our necessary documents. The overall process took longer than we expected; we could only receive our visas from the British Consulate five months after our application.

Then we found out that to travel to the UK we had to get permission from the Turkish authorities. Since we did not have our parents with us, our mother had to send a notarized letter of consent regarding our travel, which I understand was translated into Turkish and was certified by a notary once again. If it was not for the organization helping our mother in UK, we would not be able to handle this costly process. My brother and I eventually made it to the UK to live with our mother three months before I turned eighteen. It was stressful but I am happy that we are finally together with our mother.

In our first three months in the UK, my mother, my brother and I lived in a house we were granted by the state. Then we moved to a new house where we have to live for three months. We are told that after we move three times like this the state will give us a permanent house. Life in the UK is so far easy. My brother and I currently attend a language course. When I learn the language I would like to study pharmaceuticals. Our father was a dentist, so I want to work in the field of healthcare, too.

M., 18, Syria (In UK)

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I am a seventeen-year-old unaccompanied refugee child who came to Turkey from the city of Jalalabad in Afghanistan three years ago. My parents were killed eight years ago by people I did not know. I do not know why they were killed or any other detail. I was little when this all happened. Then my two brothers, my older sister and I began to live with our uncle. He had to take care of his family and us both. So I decided to work at the age of ten to take some of the load off his back and I could not go to school until I came to Turkey for this reason. I worked as a bus attendant for two years and then at an electrician's shop with my uncle for two years. I spent a great deal of my time working.

I heard my uncle and his wife talk about me one day. As I understood, the people who had killed my parents wanted to hurt me as well and I would not be safe in Afghanistan. So I decided to leave Afghanistan. My uncle made arrangements with a smuggler for my cousin and me. We first crossed to Pakistan and then to Iran. **We spent six hours climbing a hill up and six hours climbing it down to cross the Turkish border in Iran. It took us twenty four days to reach Istanbul from Afghanistan. We often walked for sixteen to eighteen hours without a stop. I suffered great difficulty because I was very young.** There were old people in our group and it was hard for them as well. We entered Turkey at Van and took a bus to Istanbul. We stayed at a smuggler's house in Istanbul for ten days. I came across a police officer when I went out to buy clothes one day and as soon as he understood that I was an unaccompanied minor he took me to the shelter where I am staying now. If I did not run into him that day, I do not know for how long I would continue to stay at the smuggler's place or what kind of a road I would have to take later.

I came to the shelter at the age of fourteen. In those days I used to dream crossing to Europe like everybody else because a lot of people did cross, who later told us that they had reached better conditions indeed. I did not have the money, however. So I gave up those dreams before long and I tried to get used to life in Turkey. It did not take a lot of time to get used to the shelter. I grew close with my friends here and get along very well with many of them.

My life can be separated into two parts: before and after I started school. I started school only at the beginning of this year in September 2017. I spent my first year at the shelter learning Turkish. I started speaking it with a considerable success at the end of three months. My aim was to go to school but I found out that since I did not have any documentation concerning my educational background in Afghanistan I could not register for school. For this reason, I did not go to school in my second year at the shelter, either. I spent that year getting involved in sports like swimming, soccer, fitness and volleyball and improving my Turkish. I do not know how exactly, but I managed to register at a school this year. I presume that a new regulation has been made that allows those without proper documentation relating to their educational past to go to school. I first took a placement test in the District Directorate of Education and then was referred to a school not far from the shelter. I am in eleventh grade now. The school is both good and bad. The teachers have a warm and understanding attitude towards me but the students in my class constantly make fun of my accent. I am the only foreigner in the class and this makes me feel lonely. I do not have close friends in the class or in the school. I have a few friends but we are not really close. My close friends are still my friends at the shelter and three or four Turks I met at the volleyball class.

Shortly after I moved in the shelter I obtained my ID document as an asylum seeker. I registered with the UNHCR and had a status determination interview at the end of my first month at the shelter. Three months later I was given refugee status by the UNHCR. Then about a year later I learned that my file was referred to the USA by UNHCR for resettlement. During this process I needed to have interviews with an organization called ICMC that works as a mediator in the USA resettlement process. My application was rejected by that organization at the end of the interviews. Currently I am preparing for an appeal against that decision, so it is not clear if I will move to the USA or not. My life will be different depending on whether I go to the USA. If my appeal is not accepted, I have no alternative plans. I just want to go to university. I want to study photography because I have taken a keen interest in it for a year and a half now. My interest in photography started thanks to a friend at the shelter. I had never seen a camera in my life. He taught me how to use a camera, how to take a picture. Nowadays I mostly take pictures of my friends; they like posing for me. They sometimes ask me to teach them how I take a picture, too.

I am worried how I can support myself at university if I stay in Turkey. Since I had to work from a very early age I have an idea how difficult it can be to go to school while working. I am worried that I might stay behind at school if I need to work. On the other hand, I already will have to work to afford a place to stay and make a living once I turn eighteen and move out of the shelter. Sometimes I think constantly about such matters because I will turn eighteen very soon. I hope that all this ambiguity will resolve immediately; this is my biggest wish.

I., 17, Afghanistan

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I am a sixteen-year-old Afghan boy. In 2016 my brother escaped from Afghanistan after he was kidnapped and released by the Taliban and then I did the same because I feared being kidnapped, too. The Taliban was very strong in the city where we lived. They would stop and harass school children and sometimes even burn their books. They did not like it that my brother went to school; they had asked him to fight with them. So my brother left Afghanistan before I did. He went to Belgium where he holds refugee status now. He went to a vocational school and studied fashion design, and he works there as a tailor now.

I never went to school and my mother would even not let me go out sometimes because the place where we lived was not safe. We never felt safe or free there. The unemployment was very common due to the war. I continue to follow the situation in Afghanistan from news and I feel sorry. Just recently another suicide bombing has taken place and killed many. I get the impression that the situation is getting worse. **I have no hope left that Afghanistan will become a safe place soon.**

I reached Turkey via irregular routes. My friends who came along had people they knew here and we initially stayed with them. **We worked as paper collectors for a long while. It is a tough job; you walk in the streets and collect waste paper from garbage containers with a bag on your back and sell it to recycling centers.** At a time when I could no longer work from backache I managed to make contact with my brother on social media using a friend's phone. My brother searched from Belgium if there was a shelter or an accommodation center where I could stay in Istanbul. Then he gave me an NGO's address and told me that there were people who would help me there. This NGO helped me register with the United Nations and placed me in the state shelter where I am staying now.

I like the place I stay at, thank God for them!, but I get bored because since I never went to school in my native country I could not register for school here. I am too old to start first grade but lack the foundation to start any grade higher. About half the children at my shelter go to school but I cannot. Still, I am excited that I will start a language course soon. For now, I just stay at the shelter and watch things, spend time with friends or play soccer. That is how I spend most of my time. There are a lot of children like me in Turkey who have escaped from the Taliban. **If maybe two or three schools opened for Afghan children, our futures would be saved.**

I applied for a humanitarian visa from Belgium to go to join my brother. He is the person I am closest to in life and he even helped me while he was away from me in Belgium. We stay in contact through social media. I miss him a lot but he cannot come to visit me because he does not have a passport, either. **If I go to Belgium, maybe I can go to school or learn a craft and work. I am thankful that in Turkey I stay at this shelter and do not have to worry about what to eat every day. It was hard working as a paper collector.** I do not have to work now but I will have to once I turn eighteen and leave the shelter. I have no education, so I will not be able to find a decent job.

I had an interview with the United Nations and obtained refugee status, but this does not mean a big change in my everyday life yet. I only see a huge ambiguity when I think about my future. So I would like to join my brother and have his guidance very much. Perhaps, if it was not for him, I would even not be able to find this shelter. You always need somebody older than you in life. I am just waiting for the outcome of my visa application for now. I hope that I will be able to come together with my brother again.

M., 16, Afghanistan

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I escaped from Afghanistan with the help of my mother at the age of fifteen. My father passed away when I was little and my mother remarried. My stepfather was pro-Taliban and had strong relations with them. He wanted to make me a member of the Taliban as I was the oldest son of the family. I refused so he used different methods to force me. He treated me badly. My mother could not endure this any longer and made a deal with a smuggler to send me away.

There are both good and bad sides to my life in Turkey. I know that I am safe at the shelter where I am staying now and I know that I have food and a bed. On the other hand, if you do not go to school, life is boring here. There is not much to do and you just try to kill time. Get up in the morning, eat and go to bed in the evening. **I wish I could register for school. Unfortunately when I first arrived in Turkey it was not as easy as it is now to register for school. I could not register because I did not speak Turkish enough. But I dedicated my time to sports, I feel good working out. It takes my despair away even if for a moment.**

Here is a typical day for me recently: I get up in the morning and go out for a run. Then I have breakfast and have another workout session. Then I take a nap and go to the boxing club in the afternoon. I forget about everything there. **I was not well mentally due to what I had been through in Afghanistan so I receive help from an institution in Istanbul. I can feel that it works for me.** It was thanks to them that I signed up for the boxing class. I have lost everything I had in life. I do not have a mother or a father or a profession. I hold on to boxing. Since they figured out what boxing means to me, people at the institution I mentioned sponsor me now. I feel grateful to them.

I do not know what I will do when I leave the shelter. All I know is that I will be on my own and will have to earn money to rent a place and pay its bills. I do not know how I can do all that and honestly I feel worried whenever I think about this. I know that other kids think about the same things, too. People moving out from the shelter work illegally at factories with other Afghans and share an apartment. I worry that I might perhaps even have to sleep in parks because I do not know anybody I would consider living with yet. I get stressed out and become pessimistic if I think too much on these matters.

I have two African friends here and we get along very well. They call me Mohammad Ali, the famous boxer. I try to stay away from people from my native place. I do not know why but I am scared of them and do not want to speak to them very much. They remind me of what I had been through. These two friends and I sometimes go to seaside. I like looking at the sea and taking a walk and spending time along the coast.

My greatest dream is to get an athletic license and join races one day, to be a famous boxer and help other children who are a situation similar to mine. I found out, however, that with the type of ID document I have I am ineligible for a license. I want this issue to be sorted out so I can do boxing professionally. When I work out I try Mohammad Ali's moves and tactics. I always watch his videos. What I have been through so far in life only forces me to become more ambitious in what I do today.

M.A., 18, Afghanistan

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I came to Turkey two years ago when I was fifteen years old. It took us almost three or four weeks to reach here from Afghanistan. In Istanbul, I first stayed in Zeytinburnu at the house of the smuggler who brought us to Turkey. It was very crowded. One day the police raided the place and once they understood that I was a minor, they took me to the shelter I am staying at now.

There was a fight among our relatives and my family relating to a land dispute, because of which I lost my father. The same relatives had started threatening me as well. We feared the Taliban, too, just like everybody else in the country. So my mother first sent me away and then she escaped to Iran herself.

I had an interview with the United Nations, and I have been recognized as a “refugee” and my file has been referred to the UK for resettlement. I will have another interview soon, which I am waiting nervously. From what I heard from friends, this process usually takes long.

I had brought my transcript from Afghanistan so I could receive an equivalency certificate and register at school here. I feel luckier than many other children since I go to school. I started school last year and I study at tenth grade now. The students and the teachers generally have a nice attitude but I still feel lonely. Despite everything, you feel like a stranger; the difference of culture and the language barrier are the two most important issues for me.

I am pretty good at math. I have a little difficulty at history and literature. This is, of course, due to the language issue. For instance, I got an F in history in the first term but the teacher helped me a little and I passed in the second term. It is getting better every day, tough. I have chosen the science and math class after all. I would like to study architecture at university.

Besides these, at school I am interested in football but we are not allowed to play professionally since our ID documents must be renewed every six months. You need to have an ID that is valid at least for a year to obtain an athletic license and play in a team. **I love playing volleyball and swimming but I am best at football. I attend the course and the workouts but I cannot join the games. This lowers your motivation after a while. When there is no achievement you can attain, why would you run?** I wish they accepted our six-month IDs and give us licenses and we could join competitions. Otherwise, you just lose your motivation. Big teams never accept foreigners in our age in the first place. But we cannot enter small ones on account of this license problem, either.

I would like to sign up for a football school and to go to university if I go to the UK. If I do not get resettled, however, this is not the end of the world. I will take the university entrance exam for foreign people here and go to a university in Turkey.

I believe that we need more teachers at the shelter. We come here having been through a lot of hardships. We do not know anything or we do not speak the language. We need people to guide us but we see that it is impossible for our teachers to take care of each of us sufficiently; sometimes just too many children come and go. I feel lucky that I could register for school, but some children just sit at the shelter all day long and do nothing but watch TV. Some others run away from the dorm and work illegally at factories or workshops. I have heard of many unable to get their pay. **It would be nice if an environment was created where every child went to school and had a chance to work on their hobbies. We do not ask for too much, I wish it was not this difficult.**

B., 17, Afghanistan

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My older brother and I had to leave Afghanistan in 2015 when I was thirteen. I had another older brother and he was a police officer in Afghanistan. He was very supportive of us and I can even say that our life in Afghanistan was pretty good. My brother and I decided to escape from Afghanistan after the day our police brother was killed by the Taliban. In fact we were sent away by our parents because they thought that we would not be safe in Afghanistan anymore. The journey was a challenge; we had to walk for so long. Whenever I felt like I could not take it anymore, my brother carried me on his back.

I reached Iran with my brother but at the Iranian-Turkish border the smuggler put us on different buses and that was when I last saw my brother. They left me at the bus terminal in Istanbul but my brother made it to Germany. I had been told I would be taken by another person at the bus terminal but nobody showed up although I waited for three days. I met another Afghan man while waiting at the bus terminal and I told him that I had no money and no place to stay and begged him to help me. He accepted to help. He found me a job at the factory where he worked. I worked with him for about two months. I was not able to work as long hours as he wanted me to because I was little. So one day he gave me 300 liras and fired me. I slept in parks or in mosques for days because I had no place to stay. One day, while I sat in a park one of my friends in Afghanistan bumped into me and I could not believe my eyes. Perhaps that was the happiest day of my life. This friend turned out to be friends with my brother on social media. He shared my phone number with my brother and two days later he gave me a call. It was touching and we both shed tears. I guess I was not expecting to find my brother's trace ever again.

Later I learned that my brother has reached Germany and stays now at a dorm for minors and there is even a legal guardian to take care of his affairs. **My brother's legal guardian in Germany contacted an organization in Istanbul and they helped me find a place at the shelter I am staying at now. I was little and swayed from one place to another then. Reaching my brother changed my life in Turkey. I got saved from having to sleep in parks.**

I like the shelter I am staying at now; it is mostly Afghan kids staying. When I first came here I used to go swimming and now my teachers here signed me up for a German class. If I can join my brother some day, I think speaking German will help me a lot. I can say I picked Turkish as well but I need to improve my speaking a bit more.

Unfortunately I could not continue my education in Turkey. I had last studied third grade in Afghanistan since it was hard getting to school because of the Taliban. I was told here that I was too old to study fourth grade, but I was also told that I lacked the foundation to start any grade higher. I can only attend a language course for now. Besides that I spend my days playing football, studying German and walking by the sea. **Since most of my friends are people who escaped from the war in Afghanistan we understand one another better so we get along well.** Everybody at the shelter likes football. Sometimes we make too much noise playing and our neighbors complain a bit. Once an old man living in the apartment block next to our shelter threw eggs at our heads.

I miss my parents and my brother. Our parents stayed behind in Afghanistan and we never heard from them in years. We tried contacting them many times via phone, social media and friends living there but to no avail. I fear that something bad might have happened to them. So does my brother.

My biggest dream is to come together with my brother again now because we perhaps have no other family left alive. I could have never guessed that things would be this hard. We even had to have a DNA test to prove that we were brothers. We then needed to bring together a lot of paperwork and have them translated. Refugee Rights Turkey offered me their assistance in this process. Only when we finally managed to complete the process did we find out that I was ineligible to apply because I was a minor and needed a grown-up to do so for me. I felt very sorry to learn this because I thought I spent months for nothing. I was relieved once I understood that we could go to court. We are waiting for a trustee to be appointed for me now. This person will have the power to sign a visa application on my behalf. I hope all these stages will be completed and I will be reunified with my brother soon. If I can go to Germany, I want to attend a private course or a school to attain a profession and to work and start a new life with my brother.

S., 16, Afghanistan

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I am a seventeen-year-old refugee from Pakistan. I arrived in Turkey about five and a half months ago. I spent my first fifteen days in the house of a smuggler. Then the police raided the place and took me to the shelter I am now staying at once they found out that I was a minor. My aim in coming to Turkey was to go to Germany through Turkey because my cousin and the husband of my sister live in Germany and I have no family left alive other than my sister and them.

I lost my father five years ago and my mother shortly after. Those who killed my father in front of my eyes were people who wanted to seize our village house. After I lost my parents I moved in with my sister and lived with her. I have no other sibling and she is more like a mother than a sister to me.

My sister's husband moved to Germany a while ago and my sister started a process to go to Germany for family reunification shortly before I left Pakistan. I was glad that she was going to move to Germany but I also felt scared and sad that I would stay on my own. So, my sister and her husband consulted with lawyers and organizations to learn if I could go live with them in Germany. Unfortunately they only received bad news. Then I tried to go to Germany via irregular routes but I was not successful and I remained in Turkey.

Once I came to Turkey I changed my mind and decided to continue my education in Turkey. I am at least safe in Turkey and I am already used to the life here. For instance, I have friends at the shelter where I stay. I finished high school in Pakistan. I did not take my diploma with me but a friend in Pakistan kindly sent it to me by mail. He even first went to Islamabad to have it certified. I owe him a lot. So I was able to take the university entrance exam for foreign students this year. I would not be able to achieve anything without my diploma.

To take the university exam for foreign students I was asked to present a national ID or a passport. I came to Turkey without a passport and my international protection registration was not complete at the time I wanted to register for the exam. I was lucky that I had a teacher from the shelter with me and thanks to him, I could register without a lot of difficulty. Otherwise, the universities I applied to would perhaps not admit me to the exam with the ID document issued to me by the shelter I am staying at.

I have been studying day and night since the day I came. I attend a Turkish language course and everybody tells me that I am progressing fast. My biggest priority now is to get accepted to one of the institutions I applied to and go to university in Turkey. My mother always wanted me to become a doctor and I want to become a doctor and save lives. I have a financial aid interview with a private university next week. I also took the exams of two other universities. I hope that one of these institutions will accept me. Because I always wanted to study medicine, I followed a curriculum with extensive physics, chemistry and biology courses in Pakistan. Those who want to study medicine in Pakistan do not study a lot of math but the system is a little different here and there are only maths, geometry and general aptitude questions in the university exam for foreigners. I do not believe that this exam can measure my interest and foundation in medicine but I am trying to do my best.

I have been in Turkey for five months now and spent a great deal of effort to learn Turkish. So I would like to continue my education in Turkey. **I will obtain a Turkish language certificate from TÖMER in eight months. What I value the most in life is education. I love studying and learning new stuff. Being in another country is a great opportunity to learn new stuff.**

I made a lot of friends at the language course I am attending. They are usually people who are in Turkey on a visa. They are going to travel to other cities soon but it is not easy for me to join them. Not only do I need to get a travel permit from the Provincial Directorate of Migration, but at the same time, I do not have the financial means since I have no source of income. I would like to travel while I continue my education but this is of course not a primary concern for me now. I do not know how I can visit my sister, either, but I miss her a lot. **I wish the travel procedure was more flexible for those who have stayed in Turkey for a certain amount of time so we would have a chance to go to see our loved ones in other cities or countries even if only occasionally. It seems that my hands are tied in this regard for now. I hope that there will be a solution in the future.**

H., 17, Pakistan

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©Abdi Deeq Muxumed



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I am a nineteen-year-old girl from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I came to Turkey in 2014 and I stayed in a state shelter with other refugee girls like me for about three years. I moved out when I turned eighteen and I share an apartment with my friends now.

My stepfather started living with us when I was eight years old and I was ill-treated by him from about when I was ten until I ran away from home at the age of fifteen. One day I could not take it anymore and escaped from Congo and came to Turkey without even letting my mother know. My family still lives in Congo but I do not speak to them.

When I first arrived in Turkey, I stayed at the house of a few people from Congo. I changed place a few times. Then somebody told me about an organization called Refugee Rights Turkey in Istanbul. I went to them to receive support and I moved in to the shelter with their help.

It was hard getting used to the life at the shelter at first because I did not speak a word of Turkish. **It also took me quite a while to get used to the food because food in Turkey is nothing like what we used to have back at home.** I started getting used to the shelter and Turkey with time. I made friends at the shelter and started learning Turkish. I guess the food was hardest to get used to.

During my stay at the shelter, I could not go to school because I was told that I needed to have my school documents brought from Congo, something that was impossible for me to do. I could not attend any of the French schools, either, because they were private and required tuition to be paid. So my time at the shelter was unfortunately not fruitful in terms of education. I could not attend school and we spent most of our time at the shelter doing practically nothing. I only took a Turkish language class at the shelter. When I went out of the shelter, it was either for shopping or to go to church.

After I was placed in the shelter, I had a status determination interview with the UNHCR. A year after the interview, I obtained refugee status. Shortly after, my file was referred to the organization called ICMC for resettlement. The USA resettlement process is advancing a little slowly, so I am a bit worried. I hope that this process will be finalized soon.

After I left the shelter, I began living in my designated satellite city. I try my best to fulfill my obligations as an asylum seeker including signing in twice a week. On the other hand, it is not easy to live in big cities at all; everything is expensive and it is hard to find work. You spend a lot on transportation just to sign in regularly. **Since I attend an English language course I can benefit from the UNHCR's new cash assistance program and it helps my subsistence for now.** I find it important to learn English; if one day the ICMC process is completed and I can go to the USA, I believe that being able to speak even a few words of English will make my life easier. I spend most of the days I do not have class with my friends at the church. I made a lot of friends from different nationalities.

I like living in Turkey but still there are things I find difficult as a foreigner. For instance, I cannot travel to another city when I want to because I first need to get a travel permit. In some neighborhoods people give me disturbing looks and I cannot tell if it is because of the color of my skin, because I am a young woman or because I am a foreigner. I sometimes get nervous just walking in the street.

My dream for the future is to study music and find work in that field. I am learning how to play the guitar now. I also sing at church on Sundays. My friends at the church asked me to sing on stage on Sundays because they think that I have a good voice. So I have been singing for a year now. Perhaps I can go to a music school in the USA. Who knows?

C., Democratic Republic of the Congo, 19

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I am an eighteen-year-old refugee girl who came to Turkey from the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2016. My intention was to go to Germany to live with my uncle, my only close family member alive, but when it was found at the airport that my passport was fake I remained in Turkey. I lost my father while I was five years old. My mother was killed one evening by unknown people for political reasons as she was the lawyer of an opposition party. I could only escape with great difficulty and used the help of a friend of my mother to come to Turkey.

I cannot believe what I had been through when I was only sixteen. I came from one end of the world to the other, to a foreign country, to save my life. I could not make contact with my uncle in Germany when I first arrived in Turkey and he was worried about me. Then I met a woman from Senegal in the street one day and told her that I did not know anybody in Istanbul and that I got arrested trying to go to join my uncle. She took me to her place and we called my uncle in Germany. My uncle and I both burst into tears on the phone. He got very upset when he heard what I had been through, so he immediately consulted with various institutions and lawyers and he eventually shared with me the contact information of Refugee Rights Turkey. It was through them that the procedure of my placement in the shelter was realized, and they also accompanied me during my registration with Turkish migration authorities, DGMM.

The authorities have always treated me nicely. **I came in the summer of 2016 and I remember running around from one place to another for a couple of days during the shelter placement process. As far as I understood, it took long because there was some unclarity at the time as to who was responsible from unaccompanied minor asylum seekers to be placed at the shelters. I hope that this ambiguity has been solved by now because I remember how anxious I felt during those a few days.** I feared that I might not be able to find a place in the end. I saw how scary the streets can be when I spent a few days without a roof on my head.

It was not easy for me to get used to the shelter. I was lucky that there were other girls from Congo at the shelter with me. We became close friends. When we went out we spent our time together, we wandered around together. I wanted to continue school in Turkey but since I did not speak any Turkish and that the French schools were private, I could not attend any school here. Turkish is a difficult language to me. I have Congolese friends who speak very good Turkish but I find Turkish hard to understand and hard to speak. If I could speak it a bit, my life would have been easier.

My life at the shelter was more comfortable when I had my friends. It became harder as some left when they turned eighteen and some left because they wanted to. I am the only foreign girl at the shelter after my last Congolese friend was transferred to another shelter. Unfortunately I could not get used to the food at the shelter; the taste is so different for me. So, when I go out from the shelter, I eat things that I like better. Turkish and foreign children stay together at our shelter. Unfortunately I do not have a lot of Turkish friends. It is both because I cannot speak Turkish well and because I believe that my Congolese friends understand me better.

My biggest dream now is to go to Germany and live with my uncle as he is the only family I have left alive. So my uncle hired a lawyer in Germany. Lawyers in Germany told us that my application for family reunification must be made by one of my parents, but neither is alive in my case. So, my uncle adopted me in Congo. We are waiting for the adoption to be recognized by the courts in Germany. In addition, I heard that this process needs to be completed before I turn eighteen so that I might have a chance. This is wearisome and stressful.

Life in Turkey is not very easy for a black girl. People in general do not think very highly of black women. When I walk in the street people sometimes give me strange looks or I hear them commenting about me when passing by. At such times, I try to walk away as fast as I can. Running away is not a solution, however. People need to change their behavior. If I can join my uncle in Germany, I think that I will have his support. I have nobody in Turkey except my friends. If I go to Germany, I would like to go to high school and become a lawyer like my mother one day.

C., 18, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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I am a seventeen-year-old refugee and I came to Turkey from Pakistan two years ago. I used to live with my parents and my five siblings in the city of Gujranwala in Pakistan. The living conditions were tough. We could not find work and when we did, we could earn barely enough for two meals however hard we worked. If you asked for more than that, you had to get out of Pakistan. I could not get on well with my father, too. He drank a lot and constantly looked for a fight. He sometimes did not come home either. For these reasons, one day I left Pakistan with my friends without even letting my family know. The smuggler first took us to Iran and we entered Turkey from there. We were a very crowded group of almost 400 people. It took us eighteen or twenty days to reach Turkey. We did not have a lot of difficulty during the most of our journey because we traveled by car; but we had to climb up and down a hill to cross the Turkish border and that part was difficult. My aim was in fact to cross to Europe from Turkey but I got sick in Istanbul and stayed in Turkey. My friends made it to countries like Greece and Italy irregularly.

At first I could not go to hospital in Turkey because I was not registered. Then a friend told me about the United Nations and said that I could receive help from them. I reached them by phone and they told me to come to Ankara. I registered with the United Nations in Ankara and then they hospitalized me and I learned that I had tuberculosis. I had an operation because wounds appeared on my arms and I was put on medication. When I got out of the hospital, I was transferred to a shelter in a city in the eastern part of Turkey. After I spent three months in a hospital and four months in this shelter, I was sent to a shelter in a metropolitan city because I started feeling worse and the weather was too cold for somebody in my situation. I recovered as a result of this transfer and I am perfectly fine now. I have been at this new shelter now for eleven months and the conditions are much better here. People treat me very well, too. Only, I found it difficult to get used to the food when I first moved in the shelter. I could not eat for a long time. But I got poisoned by food I had in the street and stayed in hospital for fifteen days. Then my teachers at the shelter offered to have my food brought in from a hotel but I refused. I am getting used to the food here now even if slowly. I only buy bread from outside, I eat the meals at the shelter with my friends. When I come back from school I chat with my teachers at the shelter for about two hours and then sit down to study. My friends often play football but I do not like it very much.

I learned Turkish from the Turkish language teacher at the shelter who has helped me a lot and from Turkish TV shows. There is a TV room at the shelter and I watch a lot of series. I used to watch Kurtlar Vadisi but I finished it and watch different series now.

Because I was sick and because I did not bring a diploma from Pakistan, I could not start school as soon I came to the shelter. After I recovered and improved my Turkish, my teachers at the shelter helped me first obtain an equivalency certificate and then register for school. I have been going to school for five months. I am now at the last year of high school. I like my class and my school. My teachers and my friends are nice to me. I am in the same class with a friend from the shelter. I do not have much difficulty in my classes. My math is a bit poor but I am good at other subjects. I took the exam for foreign students offered by Istanbul University. The results will be released in a month. If I get good results, I would like to study computer science. But, if I cannot get into university, I want to get a driver's license and work as a driver.

After I was placed at this shelter, I had a status determination interview with the UNHCR and I obtained refugee status about a month ago. I know that the United Nations may resettle a recognized refugee in a third country. If they decide to send me to another country and that country is a good one, I would like to take advantage of this opportunity. But I think that the conditions in Turkey are sufficiently good, too. My friends who went to Europe irregularly run into a lot of difficulty. Maybe I can get a visa and go visit them in the future or I might consider moving abroad myself one day. I believe that the conditions are only good if you are on a visa.

I will turn eighteen in three months and I will have to move out from the shelter but I have no plans yet. I hear that if I cannot get admitted to a university in big cities like Istanbul, I will have to move to another city. Foreigners are not allowed to stay in Istanbul and I need to find a job and a place to stay in another city. I am waiting for the exam results now. I am happy that I am safe and that I am close to realizing my dreams now but unfortunately I cannot tell what the future has in reserve for me.

R., Pakistan, 17

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I am a seventeen-year-old refugee from Syria. I was living with my family in Aleppo when the civil war in Syria began. My father owned a boutique and we had such a good life. With the outbreak of the war, we first moved from the city center to a village and then to a safer place close to the Turkish border. My father sent me to Turkey with his younger brother as a precaution against the possibility of compulsory military service. My family did not want to leave Syria or live in a European country because they worried that they might not be able to sustain their culture or lifestyle outside of Syria. They sent me to Turkey, however, because my life was in danger as a young boy.

I came to Turkey with my uncle in 2012. After I stayed with him for a while, I moved in to a house where there were asylum seekers from Syria staying. My uncle, on the other hand, went to Germany via irregular routes. **I worked as a cleaner at a Syrian restaurant to earn a living for a long time. I worked for 12 hours a day and only earned 300 liras a month. I was not aware how poor the payment was since I was only 11 years old. I would be exhausted at work and go home just to sleep.** I spent a long time like this. Then, my grandparents came to Turkey and I stayed with them for a short while. My grandfather passed away in 2015 and when my grandmother and my uncle were resettled to the United States by the United Nations, I remained on my own once again.

So, I took a job at a textiles workshop and stayed with my aunt. I figured after a while that I could not stay with my aunt for long because my uncle-in-law and I did not get along well. I lived in the streets for some time. Once my money was stolen, and generally speaking, I spent days in misery during this time. **In Turkey, there is usually a hospitable attitude towards Syrians but I also occasionally hear bad things being said about Syrians and this upsets me.**

After I lived in the streets for a long time without a permanent address, I got to know about Refugee Rights Turkey thanks to a friend I stay in contact with through social media. They helped me find a place in the shelter I am currently staying at.

I have been staying at the shelter for almost two weeks now. I wish I came here earlier. I have worked constantly since I came to Turkey, so I could neither go to school nor take a course somewhere. I worked for long hours and I got dragged from one place to another. I have been in Turkey for a long time but I cannot speak good Turkish yet. On the other hand, I watched a lot of videos online and improved my English. Now that I am here at the shelter, I want to improve my Turkish practising with my friends. I then would like to register for school. I do not know how to do so but I would love to go to Canada where I have friends living. Otherwise, my biggest dream is to continue school in Turkey.

I.S. , 17, Syria

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Refugee
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