

Love and the Islamic State



Syrian refugees in Gaziantep, Turkey. Photo taken by Amie Williams.

The day after Turkish national elections restored the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to its former dominance, I traveled from Istanbul to Gaziantep by bus. It is a crazy, 18-hour journey that traverses most of the country, from the northwest tip to the southeast. The buses were like small airplanes—sleek, white, equipped with small TV screens on the backs of seats, and serving tea and coffee every few hours. My traveling companion and translator, Gulnaz Can, was a young Turkish journalist from London. She didn't tell her employer, an international aid organization, that she was traveling to southeast Turkey because her bosses would never clear her to travel to this region, so close to the Syrian border and Islamic State-controlled territory.

While most of my fellow passengers slept, I stared out the window. I had come here to conduct research for a screenplay I am writing. The project is about the route a young Tunisian

woman took, one year earlier, to find her sister who married a jihadi, joined Islamic State, and is purportedly now living in Raqqa, Syria.



Gaziantep Central Bus Station.

[Gaziantep](#) is a bustling town of more than 2 million, awash in colorful contrasts. Known as the kitchen of Turkey, Gaziantep is famous for its sweet baklava, made with the slender pistachios grown in massive groves on the city's outskirts. The region is also host to the largest organized industrial zone in Turkey, with a huge textile industry that employs thousands, many of them refugees. And Gaziantep is the current command post for many of the Syrian opposition groups vying for their piece of an increasingly complex sliver of pie that is the 62-mile contested border area between Syria and Turkey.



The famous baklava of Gaziantep.

At a local cafe in the historic Jewish-Armenian part of town, a crush of narrow cobblestone streets and quaint courtyard cafes, we listened to a young woman playing the [baglama](#) and singing a sad Kurdish love song, a paperback biography of Che Guevara by her side. Someone had scrawled on the wall: “He asked me, why do you fight when you know you can’t win, and because I did not want to upset him, I did not respond by saying, why do you live, when you know you will die?”



Old Armenian part of town

Elsewhere hung portraits of Kurdish poets and rebels. The place was packed with cigarette-smoking students from Gaziantep University, one of the top engineering schools in Turkey. One of them was our guide, Memed Akif, a PhD candidate in economics. “People are politicized very early here,” he explained.

Although nightly news reports focused on the steady stream of Syrian refugees to Europe, there are [more than 1.8 million](#) refugees in Turkey. Roughly 500,000 of these are in Gaziantep, according to our Kurdish journalist, most of them recent arrivals from Aleppo. Exploring the back streets, I see a Syrian girl, no more than six years old, playing “teacher” to her three younger brothers in a make-believe school. They sit attentively on concrete blocks, eagerly raising their hands as she reads from a torn notebook. Many Syrian refugee children here, due to language barriers and bureaucracy, do not have the [luxury of attending school](#).

In another alley, we meet a large family from Aleppo, who told

us they have been basically homeless for two years. Three generations of women squat against a crumbling stone wall, while the brothers break up scraps of particle wood for fire and the father tries to connect loose wires in a vain attempt to pirate electricity.



A Syrian refugee woman.

Back at the cafe, I took a [short video](#) of the young woman singing, the haunting lyrics a perfect soundtrack for musings on my script—a true story of two sisters torn apart by Islamic State. I will call them Leila and Essma for reasons of anonymity. Both spent time in this town along their journeys. Walking through the narrow, cream-brick alleyways where the Armenians used to live, I feel the ghosts of this town, a continual, tragic backdrop to larger international struggles.

We stumbled on a small film crew that morning, filming a local soap opera. Gulnaz tells me that another popular Turkish TV show, [“Yabancı Damat”](#) (literally “The Foreign Groom”), was shot here. A love story of a Turkish man and a Greek woman, it

is known in Greece as “The Borders of Love.”



Film crew shooting a Turkish soap opera.

I have been struggling to understand why Leila, the younger of the two Tunisian sisters, left the relative safety and comfort of her middle-class home in Tunis, crossing through Turkey to Syria to join her husband. She was a typical teenager in many ways, into sports and even hip-hop. Her older sister Essma tells me she was in love, only 19 and very naive. She was also pregnant. In Tunisian society, having sex before marriage is still a huge taboo, so it is not a big stretch to sympathize with this girl’s reasoning and limited choices. The resounding stereotype of a young woman traveling to Syria to join Islamic State has been that of a docile girl being lured through social media by a seductive male. But through my research, I am finding the motivations of many of these women to be varied and far more complex.

Earlier this year in London, I met with Erin Saltman, a senior researcher at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and

contributor to [“Becoming Mulan?: Female Western Migrants to ISIS.”](#) She and her fellow researchers combed through the social media accounts of women who lived in Islamic State-controlled territory, finding that it was often women who attracted and recruited other young women. One particularly compelling Tumblr page I read before it disappeared, “Diary of a Muhajirah” (muhajirah means “one who leaves something”), speaks of joining a utopian sisterhood, far from the cruel, cliquish realities so many teenage girls must survive in Western schools and society.

Saltman’s study also revealed how these women feel a deep compassion for Syria’s war victims, citing the oppression of Muslims worldwide. They are attracted by the idea of building a new life, contributing to a grand cause. The online messages also warn them to come prepared: “To live a completely different kind of life means completely changing your outlook on life and researching as much as you want until you feel content with what you are about to do and know it is right,” one muhajirah wrote in her blog.

Essma did make it to Raqqa to find Leila and try to convince her to return home. She told me about the locked-down life she witnessed there, with her sister reduced to raising her child and cooking most of the day because there was nothing else to do. Women were rarely let out of their homes or seen on the streets, she told me. Leila busied herself with domestic chores and child rearing, venturing out to meet with other young Islamic State brides only occasionally to share cake recipes and sip tea at the town’s madhafa, or females’ hostel.

I asked Essma how she managed to leave Raqqa and return to Tunis given the tight grip Islamic State commanders had on the town. She shrugged, “It was easy, normal.” There were many informal transports for Syrian refugees and a steady stream of underground trade in such items as petrol, cigarettes, and drugs. She kept repeating that word over and over, “normal.” I sensed she was internalizing, like her sister, a deeper

discomfort of not being able to speak about the unspeakable, or to admit a major mistake had been made. It is not unlike the post-traumatic stress disorder I witnessed in American female combat soldiers who fought in the Iraq War, and who masked their deep disillusionment with joining a cause they largely miscalculated. It is a sentiment I hear echoed in so many women I have interviewed over the years who have been raped, battered, or abused.

For anyone who has been in an addictive relationship or has rationalized being trapped in a violent one, the line between insanity and passion can easily blur. Add religion or the search for spiritual relief to the mix, and you stumble into territory that is understandably murky, but unfortunately all too common for women.

Over strong Turkish coffee, Gulnaz tells me, "Turkey is a melancholy country—my Kurdish father used to stare out the window at the mountains and cry." Unlike her father, she is the perfect, upbeat travel companion. Married to a Briton and living in London for the past year, she is falling in love with her country all over again. We laugh a lot at the way the mainstream media so often misses the nuances of life lived on the edges of conflict, and how the word "Islam" so often appears in the same sentence as the word "terrorist."

We also muse at how even our own friends and families were appalled at our travel plans. The fact is, however, most of the 2 million people living in Gaziantep go about their daily business normally—working, drinking coffee, selling SIM cards, and, yes, even falling in love.



Main

shopping street in Gaziantep

We walk through the small bazaar, combing through piles of [kutnu](#)—the shiny, striped fabric that Gaziantep is famous for. We spend the afternoon interviewing a young female politician, Berivan Özpolat, who heads the local chapter of the [DBP](#), the pro-Kurdish feminist party affiliated with the larger Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). The entrance to the chapter office is concealed around the back of a nondescript building. Inside, orange plastic chairs are being set up for a meeting. She is in a hurry. As sun streams into her cramped office she talks of how women in Gaziantep have always been exploited, hired as cheap labor in the textile factories, or made to crack pistachio shells, sitting for hours in inhuman conditions. She calls it “savage capitalism.”



A Syrian refugee

The huge influx of female Syrian refugees has only guaranteed that this treatment will continue, if not worsen. One alarming local phenomenon is the selling of Syrian brides to Turkish men, apparently a thriving business, even though the men and women do not share a common language.

Our stay in Gaziantep ends with a flourish: We're invited to a Kurdish wedding. I watch as the young couple, no older than 22, enter a packed wedding hall and take their place center stage, dancing shyly, as a Kurdish band blares through damaged loudspeakers. Guests, mostly men, approach the stage with wads of American bills and throw them at the couple, a symbol of hoped-for prosperity. We drink Orange Crush from plastic cups (this is a Muslim wedding, after all) and watch the dollars flutter like snowflakes around the newlyweds and settle to the floor, only to be swept up by a young boy and recycled for another well-wisher to toss at the couple.

Then all the young men are called to the stage and line up, locking pinkie fingers to begin the slow, deliberate Kurdish

men's wedding dance, their grim faces broken only by a few halfhearted grins.

For the nine days I have been in Turkey, I have been trying to figure out why so few people smile here. Watching the dance as it slowly gathers momentum, I cannot help thinking of the Kurdish insurgency and the thousands of young men and women still fighting, the millions of displaced Syrians, and the precariousness of borders drawn by proxy wars, brutal extremists, corrupt leaders, and careless foreign policy.

Less than a week later, I am back in my guest house in Tunis, watching with horror as a television reporter on France 24 reports a shooting at a popular restaurant in Paris, then starts fielding reports of a bomb at a soccer stadium and hundreds taken hostage at a rock concert. I stay up through the night, glued to the television and, like so many others, madly typing on Facebook and Twitter to see if my friends in France are safe. Then, a week later, as I am attending the Carthage Film Festival at a hotel in downtown Tunis, a bomb explodes less than three blocks from us. Perhaps I have my answer.

I get the distinct sense that I am living in a horror film, and that my own screenplay has suddenly turned real. I feel dizzy, disoriented. I call Essma and she tells me she has not heard from her sister in Raqqa for two weeks. She may never know if Leila has perished in the carpet-bombing that has started there.

As the aftermath of these attacks settle into our collective conscience, I keep thinking of that little Syrian girl in Turkey, clutching her torn spiral notebook. She had a red pencil in her hand and a sweet smile on her face.

How I wish our world leaders could sit for just one minute on those concrete blocks in that back alley in Gaziantep in front of this little girl. Perhaps she could teach us how to pause

and listen. Perhaps she could tear a sheet from that tattered spiral notebook of hers and help us learn her language so we could, perhaps, write an entirely different story.

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