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Exploring migration, diversification and urban transformation in contemporary Istanbul: The case of Kumkapı

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Abstract

The growing flows of international migration to Turkey have significant implications for the social, economic and spatial transformation of recipient cities across the country. This exploratory paper aims to highlight some of these implications, through discussing empirical findings from an ethnographic study carried out in an inner-city locality of Istanbul known as Kumkapı, which today has become a central hub of arrival, settlement and transit for various migrant groups. It raises four main points: 1) the emergence of migrant hubs are not accidental and the determining factors are multiple 2) they are highly diverse in new and complex ways, 3) within such areas multiple differences emerge and converge in shaping how space is made accessible, useful and meaningful, 4) diversification and informalities in migrant hubs are perceived and responded to in varying and conflicted ways.

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Contents

International migration to Turkey is a field attracting growing academic interest by researchers from across disciplines. While the field expands, numerous dimensions informing migrants' experiences in Turkey are becoming more visible, such as ethnicity (Danış, Taraghi, and Pérouse 2009), religion (Danış 2006), gender (Akalin 2007), race (Sutter 2013), and their intersections with differences in employment sector (Şaul 2013, Toksöz, Erdoğdu, and Kaşka 2013), migration motive (Wissink, Duevell, and van Eerdewijk 2013) and legal status (Biehl 2015, Parla 2011). However, while most migrations to Turkey are predominantly urban in nature, the city and/or the spaces migrants inhabit often appear only as context, being rarely considered as a factor that shapes and is shaped by migration (Özdil 2008, Yükseker 2004, Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011). Similarly, the unit of analysis is often determined through an "ethnic lens" (Berg and Sigona 2013, Vertovec 2007), hence focusing on particular ethnic and/or national groups, with few attempts being made to understand relations between the diversity of migrant/non-migrant groups inhabiting shared spaces (Yükseker 2004). In view of these limitations (cf. Biehl 2013), in this exploratory paper I will present four key points emerging from ethnographic research I have carried out as a PhD project in a migrant hub of Istanbul,[1] with the aim to further discussions about the intersections between migration, diversification and urban transformation in the Turkish context.

1. The emergence of migrant hubs are not accidental and the determining factors are multiple

Since the 1990s, Istanbul has started being impacted by the increasing movement of international migrants moving to and through the city who have come with the intention of settling and/or working, seeking asylum or transiting to a third country (Icduygu and Biehl 2008). In this process, Kumkapı, a neighborhood located on the historical peninsula, has emerged as one of the main hubs for these various groups. In tracing the geographic and historical context of Kumkapı's social and spatial transformation to the present day, it becomes obvious that international

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1 I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Kumkapı between August 2012 and October 2013, entailing informal discussions and/or interviews with over 100 residents and business owners in the locality, and participant observations for 6 months through a room rented in an apartment building converted for migrant room-rentals.

migrant settlement here is accidental, being variably and uniquely shaped by other local histories of migration, economic restructuring and rescaling processes, as well as emergent local practices.

Embedded migration histories. For several centuries, Kumkapı was considered a residential quarter for Greek and Armenian citizens of the Ottoman state, then Turkish Republic. Following the 1950s, however, the demographic profile and spatial function of Kumkapı began changing quite substantially, through forces similarly impacting other minority quarters of Istanbul (Mills 2010, Soytemel 2014). This is the period during which large segments of the religious minority populations of Kumkapı emigrated abroad, in the face of discriminatory state policies and growing nationalistic public hostility. The accompanying wave comprised exponentially growing rural immigration to İstanbul due to decline in agriculture and rise of import-substituting industrialization. Hence as minority populations steadily emigrated, their neighborhoods throughout Istanbul began transforming into points of arrival and settlement for internal migrants. In Kumkapı's neighboring districts the spread of commercial businesses also had a key impact in instigating this change: following the mid-1960s Gedikpaşa rapidly emerged as a central node of small-scale shoe manufacturers and traders (Müftüoğlu 2005), while automotive related galleries, spare-part and repair shops opened up across Laleli (Keyder 1999).[2] In the face of such changes settled residents of these old districts were being drawn to the newly developing middle class areas (Keyder 2005), while for incoming internal migrants commercialization in the area was attractive, implying availability and proximity of jobs.

Emergence of a transnational trading zone. The radical transformation in neighboring Laleli district from the late 1970s onwards in the face of successive new economic opportunities, catering initially to Arab tourists and traders (Keyder 1999), then to "suitcase traders" from Russia (Yükseker 2004), is very likely to have set the initial trigger for the arrival of foreigners in the surrounding area, whether as tourists, traders, customers or migrants. Today, Laleli still remains a significant market place for cross-border trading, while the customer profile has greatly diversified from the previous predominance of Russians to include many countries in the Caucuses and Central Asia, and increasingly more in the Middle East and Africa (Eder and

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2 These are historical district names that are known and used more commonly in place of the official neighborhood names. At present, each district roughly encompasses the following administrative neighborhood units: Kumkapı (Katip Kasım, lower part of Nişanca and Muhsine Hatun), Gedikpaşa (Mimar Hayrettin), Laleli (Mesih Paşa, Mimar Kemalettin, upper part of Nişanca and Saraç İshak).
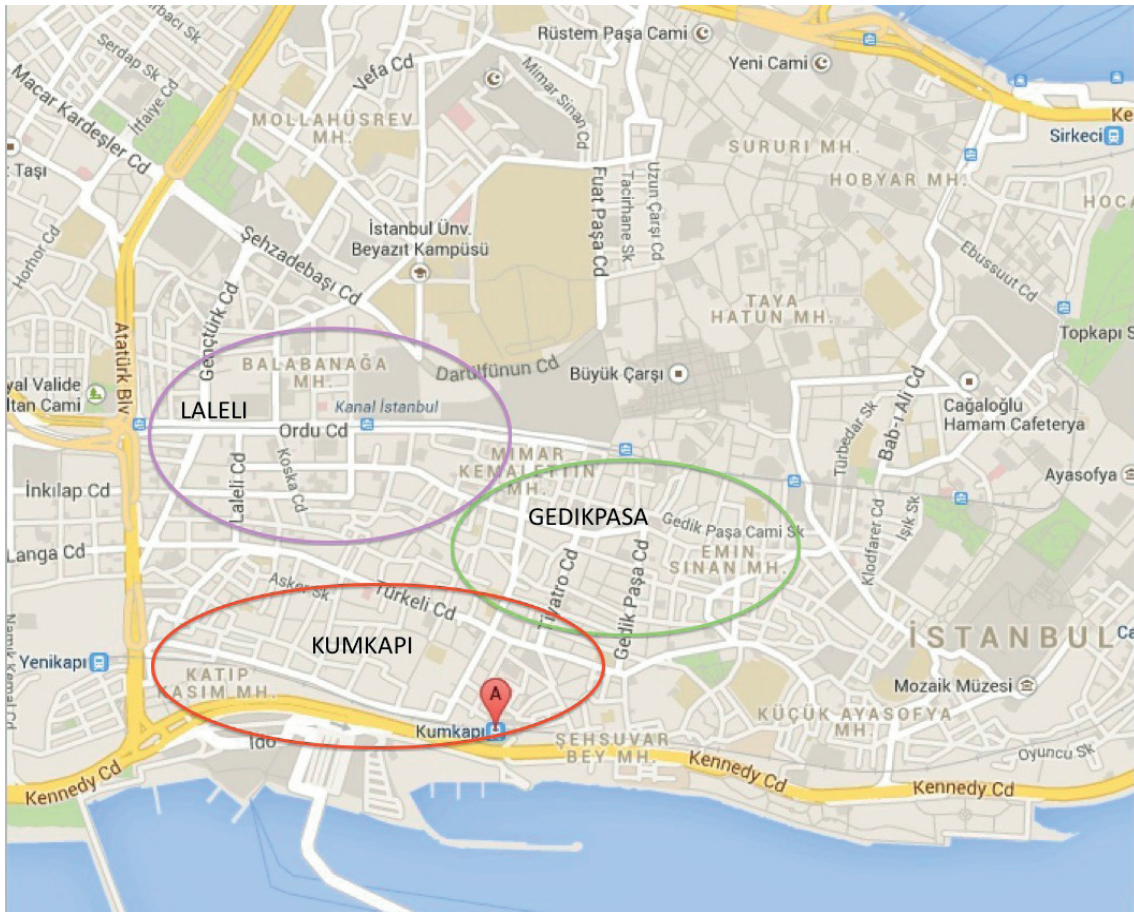
Figure 1: Map of Istanbul's historical peninsula

Öz 2010). Moreover, an ever escalating number of foreigners are integrated into the Laleli economy and its manufacturing counterpart in Gedikpaşa, not just as traders, but in a plethora of jobs opportunities from being a menial worker, to sales assistant to transnational broker.

Housing availability and flexibility. As these transformations have been taking place in the surrounding area, Kumkapı appears to have emerged as the residential counterpart, with an increasing number of properties being let to foreigners, in the form of entire flats, rooms in shared households, and even as sheds in basements or rooftops. Some buildings are even fully refurbished for these purposes, with flats being converted into studio rooms with shared kitchen/bathroom facilities. The density of this housing type is very high, as several people often share single rooms. The turnover of people is also extremely rapid, as most do not arrive with the intent of settling. And as will be further detailed in the third section, housing is also being

made more flexibly available in Kumkapı in relation to sharing and non-residential use practices.

Rise and spread of (informal) migrant economies. As the residential foreigner population in Kumkapı has grown, so have businesses catering to their needs, like in the dozens of Internet and international calling centers and laundry services. Because of the density of the resident population and high turnover rate, the number of super markets, real estate offices and second hand furniture shops available are much higher than what would be expected in an average residential neighborhood of this scale elsewhere in İstanbul. More importantly, many migrants have started establishing their own businesses, usually in cooperation with natives to formalize the business or simply prevent competitive harassment by them. The dozens of country and region specific cargo companies established to serve "shuttle traders" are a notable example.[3] Then there are also many ethnic restaurants and hairdressers, most of which have no signs, are known to and serve primarily members of the co-national/ethnic community. What is further notable is that business practices in the area are characterized by a high degree of informality in two senses: They often provide accessible and proximate informal employment opportunities for migrants, and they can also provide informal services not easily/affordably available elsewhere – e.g. as in money banking and remittance transfers.

2.   Migrant hubs are highly diverse in new and complex ways

Key hubs of migrant arrival and settlement across many global cities of the world are incredibly diverse, forming social contexts that some scholars have started to describe as "super-diverse" (Vertovec 2007). Kumkapı portrays this point quite vividly.

Foreigner population. To recognize the immense diversity of its foreigner population, one only needs to look at the country calling deals listed by the dozens of call-

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3 As the trader profile of Laleli began expanding geographically, many foreigners came to recognize the advantage of their transnational networks in managing the shipment component of the shuttle trade economy. But Laleli has become both extremely expensive for such business since street level spaces are used for display, and/or impractical because many of its main streets have been closed to traffic in recent years by the Municipality to give more of an open mall feel to shoppers. Hence Kumkapı has come to offer a more viable and affordable alternative.

ing centers spread across Kumkapı to deduce the very diverse origins of the new residents, ranging from Georgia to Turkmenistan in the Caucuses, Moldova to Russia in Eastern Europe, Somalia to Nigeria in Africa, and Syria to Sri Lanka in Asia and the Middle East. These various national groups are also diverse internally, showing differences in language, ethnicity and religion. Moreover, some nationality groups show distinctions by gender and age compositions. Migration channels and motives are equally variable with some groups arriving on tourist visas, others on fake passport, and others by crossing the border undocumented; some have come to Istanbul with the purpose of working, others seeking asylum, while others transiting onwards to Europe. Depending on these motives and channels, legal statuses and entitlements that migrants are able to obtain also vary, which often fluctuate depending on Turkey's migration policy interests at the time. Last, but not least, the employment sectors that different migrant groups are able to access vary according to matters such as gender, race, language and transnational networks. As such, there are countless intersecting variables informing migrant's chances and strategies of local integration.

Native population. What is important to note is that the native population of Kumkapı, meaning those who are territorially rooted and are citizens of the Turkish state, is also far from being homogenous. The varying historic migration flows to and from Kumkapı that were mentioned previously can be traced within its current population. Today there remains a small resident population of Greek, Armenian and Assyrian Christian minorities, although most of them have migrant origins as well, coming in recent decades from the Eastern provinces of Turkey. The ethnically Turkish resident population is also small, consisting of families that migrated to the area between the 1960s and 1970s, primarily from the Black Sea and Central Anatolia, which were among the first internal migrants in Kumkapı. Though their numbers today are low, it is notable that the presence of the above groups lingers also in the form of property and business ownership. As more recent arrivals following the 1990s, it is ethnic Kurds and Arabs from Eastern Turkey that constitute the largest native population in Kumkapı. Overall then, the native population is also internally differentiated by religion, ethnicity, language, regional origin, migration time and motive, gender, age, family, labour opportunities, ties with place of origin, local reception, etc. And it is important to note that each of these groups are also distinct in terms of their historical and present experiences of exclusion and discrimination by the Turkish state, which can be significant in determining the nature of relations formed with other migrant arrivals and meanings attached to space.

3.   Within migrant localities multiple differences emerge and converge in shaping how space is made accessible, useful and meaningful

As discussed in the first section, reasons for arriving/settling in Kumkapı are similar, however the experience and practices of living in this locality is far from being equal. Rather, various differences distinctly converge with temporal, spatial and social factors, creating unique experiences for different groups. And as I have detailed elsewhere (Biehl 2014), housing provides a useful case for understanding how such differences emerge and converge in shaping the diverse ways that is space made accessible, useful and meaningful in Kumkapı.

Entanglement of socially and locally constructed differences. One sphere in which the varying differences determining access to housing can be clearly read is in the advertisements for room rentals that are posted on walls and windows all across Kumkapı. There are four terms, *bekar* (single), *aile* (family), *bayan* (woman) and *yabancı* (foreigner) that are likely to appear in these advertisements either alone or combined. These distinctions are partly shaped by local custom and culture, where, for instance, the emphasis on *aile* versus *bekar* expresses traditional conceptions of family honour such that the presence of single persons in a building occupied by families is seen as threatening. While *bekar* is not a gendered term per se, the emphasis on *bayan* is rather symbolic of the gendered migration patterns to the area that has created this demand. It can be related to local customs around family honour and/or gender roles as well, such that women are not seen as threatening family honour and are thought to take better care of property. This preference, however, is sometimes also symbolic of more subtle intentions, embedded in the particular employment practices (e.g. sex work) and legalization strategies (e.g. entering into romantic relations with citizens to obtain documents), which female migrant populations have become associated with (Bloch 2011). Hence this emphasis on *bayan* sometimes also harbours romantic requests, and even if not the outright intent at first, many lone female migrants in Kumkapı eventually find themselves vulnerable to such requests made by landlords and/or other male tenants. Similar subtleties emerge related to race. Although the rental signposts do not spell out such distinctions, many landlords and realtors in fact distinguish between *yabanci* and *zenci,* the Turkish expression to denote a Black person. Hence when a Black migrant responds to any one of these ads, it is likely that they will be turned down or shown lesser quality housing upon face-to-face contact.

Housing quality and use as a differentiating source. Related to this, housing quality and use is another sphere through which differences become visible. The housing stock of Kumkapı varies both externally, from rundown historic terraced houses to newly renovated modern apartment buildings, and internally, as basement sheds and rooftops are increasingly converted into rooms. There are significant variations in the way migrants use their housing spaces in terms of sharing practices (e.g. how many people share a single room and how often, whether or not one has a say in choice of other tenants) and non-residential uses (e.g. rooms serving also as informal restaurant and/or hairdresser). While surely the landlord has the ultimate say over quality and use, which as exemplified above can vary according to changing migration waves, demands, and gender and race related differences, migrants' preferences are often determined by a more complex set of interchanging variables, including migration motives and channels, employment opportunities, legal status and strategies, length of residence, local and transnational networks, and even life altering events such as marriage, children or illness. In return, as patterns emerge around different uses of housing by different migrant groups, this in itself feeds into narratives of difference. The gendered practice noted previously is one example. Likewise, racist discrimination by white natives and foreigners alike toward Black migrants is often grounded in housing use narratives, i.e. that they accept to live in crowds in shabby basements, which of course rarely acknowledge the numerous factors that place them in such housing in the first place.

Diversity in "home-space" perceptions. As in housing access, use and quality, there are significant variations in individual perceptions, relations and meanings that residents of Kumkapı associate with their dwelling spaces, or otherwise "home-spaces" (Biehl 2014). Matters such as functionality, temporariness, necessity, security, and for others insecurity, sociality and familiarity, while for others solitude and strangeness, all differently come to fore. What is notable is that these variations are often determined by the confluence of multiple variables, including but not only limited those immediately observable, such as gender and race. For example migration purpose, age, language, future aspirations (e.g. home ownership, education) and culture (e.g. moral norms, familial expectations, food and socializing) are equally important in shaping how "home-spaces" in Kumkapı are made meaningful. Similarly time itself is very relevant. Decisions, motives and strategies in the migration framework do not necessarily operate in linear time being impacted by both inconspicuous changes of everyday life, such as ageing, or life-altering events like getting married, having children or becoming seriously ill. Hence, a perceived temporariness of space

might suddenly appear more permanent, leading to readjustments in how a dwelling space is perceived, and therefore organized.

4.   Diversification and informalities in migrant hubs are perceived and responded to in varying and conflicted ways

There are varying patterns observable in the ways that processes of diversification and the prevalence of informality in Kumkapı today is perceived and experienced across most groups.

Diversity as pollution. For many residents the changing and intensifying diversification of Kumkapı is related to a perception of the place having become polluted, both in reference to the eroding physical conditions and over-crowdedness of streets and housing stock, as well as cultural and social matters, like behavior on streets, housing use and employment practices, as well as crime. Among the older settled residents living in the area for several decades, this is often voiced through nostalgic comparisons made with a past when it is said that friendly and respectful neighborly relations was a norm, and residents felt secure in their homes and on the streets. What is notable is how such narratives of pollution are often attributed by different groups to the sequential arrival of new migrant groups, such that the oldest ethnic-Armenians speak of the arrival of ethnic-Turkish migrants as a starting point, whereas the latter refer to the ethnic-Kurds, they to "Russians",[4] they to "Blacks"[5], and they to the newest incoming residents, the Syrian refugees.

Diversity as opportunity. Against such exclusionary discourses, there are also many who, often in the same discussion, celebrate the dynamism of Kumkapı's diversity, particularly in relation to economic opportunities offered, and recognize that one must be welcoming and open to the demands of a highly diverse and dynamic population. This can materialize in forms such as a business targeting foreigners incorporating multi-language signs and hiring multi-lingual staff; a calling shop opening a retail stall in a corner of the shop for customers who might also be traders; an international shipping company setting up money banking and transfer services for local

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4   The term "Russians" is often used in reference to migrants coming from all Former Soviet Union countries, ranging from Moldova in the West to Uzbekistan in the East.

5   The Turkish term *zenci* is commonly used to describe migrants of color arriving from a diverse range of countries in West and East Africa, and sometimes also South Asia.

migrants; or an estate agent providing additional services such employment procurement or setting up appointments with Turkish authorities. As discussed above, in the housing sector more specifically this openness entails accommodating varying house sharing and use practices.

Diversity as "openness". There are further subtleties to what is understood as Kumkapı's "openness" which expands beyond, but is also deeply tied to the economic domain. Firstly, Kumkapı is seen as a space where formal mechanisms and even laws can be negotiated and/or fully avoided. The spread of informal economic activities in the area can be considered as one of the markers. More particularly though, it is related to the fact that many of Kumkapı's foreigner residents are undocumented or irregular in terms of entry, residence and/or work status.[6] Likewise illegal businesses are proliferating in the area, including human smuggling, drug trading and prostitution, involving migrants both as trader and client. In view of this, there is an overarching perception among residents, natives and foreigners alike, which is that local authorities and security forces have little power or interest to change this. The "openness" of Kumkapı is also sometimes referred to as a stretching of Turkish cultural and moral norms. This aspect surfaces most poignantly in the sphere of housing. As detailed above, differences along lines of family status, race and gender are important variables determining access, quality and experience of housing in Kumkapı. Nevertheless, it is seen as a place where differences, both in terms of social group and housing use practices, which are otherwise seen as unfavorable at the larger societal level, are accommodated one way or the other. On the other hand, this exceptional openness is also seen as one of the main factors that has turned Kumkapı into a place that is polluted in the symbolic sense, as mentioned above.

Diversity as comfort versus insecurity. In view of these different dimensions, diversification and informality in Kumkapı appears to produce a conflicted relation to place.

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6   Although there are varying strategies that international migrants in Kumkapı seek to legalize their residential status, most are only temporary and uncertain in nature. And even for those who are able to obtain residence permits more securely, possibilities of obtaining working permissions are near impossible (In 2008 only 11 % of all registered foreigners held a work permit, which remain mostly limited to highly skilled professionals [Erder and Kaska 2012, 118]), which means that many end up working as *kaçak işçi* (illegal laborers) irrespective of residential status. Others lapse into the category of being labeled *kaçak* (illegal) person all together, as they refrain from attempts to formalize their legal status to begin with, either because they only intend to stay in İstanbul temporarily and/or have been informed through their networks that they need not bother because authorities do not really care.

On the one hand, it is seen as offering a unique balance between community and anonymity. At the micro level, ethnic communities and economies are being formed, which afford a sense of familiarity and solidarity to migrants even amidst intense diversity. In return, the multiplicity of differences across lines nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, language and the like co-existing in shared spaces affords a sense of anonymity with migrants being less concerned about sticking out. Yet as mentioned, Kumkapı's openness implies also uncertainty and insecurity, because in a place where legal, social and moral norms seem to be put on hold, room for exploitation will also remain plenty. For example, foreigners and natives alike complain about not being offered protection by police and law enforcement against crime in the area, with claims that some police in fact act as culprits as well. Foreigners in particular state that they have no place to turn to when they are harassed on streets, or abused and cheated by employers and landlords. Yet to describe this as place of social and moral chaos would be a misstatement. Rather residents and business owners alike show active efforts to keep conflicted encounters across groups at a minimum, which is often grounded in narratives about the shared and necessary living interests of all, despite great differences.

5.   Concluding remarks

This exploratory paper highlights four interrelated points emerging from an empirical analysis of migration, diversification and urban transformations in a migrant hub of Istanbul. The first is that in understanding migrant settlement patterns in the city, urban and local histories of migration, diversification and socio-economic development each play an important and entangled role that must be acknowledged. Related to this, it should be recognized that the substance of local diversities are continually changing, where global migration flows of recent decades have made the variables of difference much more complex and interchangeable. In turn, these differences converge on the ground with multiple factors that are temporally, geographically, socially and spatially situated, mutually conditioning where and how one lives. The case of Kumkapı presented in this paper also reflects how experiences, perceptions and responses to processes of diversification can be conflicted in nature, harboring senses of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, tolerance and intolerance at the same time, especially when in the context of loose formal structures. The importance of rec-

ognizing these different but interconnected dimensions seems timely and important in the current context of growing communal conflict in localities of Syrian refugee settlement across different cities in Turkey.[7] Such analyses seem also pertinent to the field of Turkish studies more generally, as it includes but also expands beyond more common emphases on religion, gender and ethnicity based differences, modernist and neo-liberal ideologies pervasive in Turkish society for understanding the shaping and contestation of urban space, to encompass new and multiple axes of differentiation, as well as new modes of pluralistic living in contemporary Turkey.

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7 "Urban Transformation: Syrian Refugees Boost Istanbul Rent Prices," Daily Sabah, July 14, 2014, **http://www.dailysabah.com/money/2014/07/14/urban-transformation-syrian-refugees-boost-istanbul-rent-prices**. "Threat of social conflict higher as Syrian refugee crisis grows," The Daily Zaman, August 14, 2014, **http://www.todayszaman.com/national_threat-of-social-conflict-higher-as-syria-refugee-crisis-grows_355638.html**.

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