



## Life Across the Street from a Civil War

by Alina Lehtinen - 12.11.2012

HATAY PROVINCE, TURKEY -- One of the main Muslim holidays, Eid al-Adha, came at the end of October. During the massive fireworks and celebrations all around Turkey, fighting continued in Syria despite hopes for a cease fire. Even though the Turkish military is playing a more visible role by the border, the trust in the Turkish government efforts in keeping its people safe is fading as the war in Syria continues.

The first time I visited the Turkey-Syria border was June 2011. Turkey had just experienced its first large inflow of Syrian refugees and many journalists had arrived flown in to cover the crisis.

Then, there were around 9,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey. The borders would remain open, it seemed, and no refugee would be turned away. Needless to say, a lot has changed since then. Turkey is currently hosting more than 100,000 Syrian refugees. The Turkish government says that they are at their limit of how many they can host. As clashes between rebels and regime forces escalate along the border, Turkish citizens living nearby are becoming more and more anxious. Many say they cannot sleep at night and fear the violence flowing over to their side of the border. The border town residents do not believe the government can keep them safe.

“We can’t sleep or live here,” said Serif Ölmez, 59, a Hacıpaşa resident. “There was a helicopter bombing about 15 minutes ago. You will hear,” he said.

A group of men drinking tea in Turkish town of Altınözü, near the border, are also tired of the conflict. Altınözü is hosting many Syrian refugees and there is a refugee camp in the town. Tensions are high between the residents and the Syrian refugees.

“We don’t want people from Syria to come here,” they all agreed.

Turkey’s border with Syria is about 550 miles long. In many places, the distances between towns and villages on either side are only a few hundred yards. The Turkish residents of border towns have a good reason to be scared. On October 3, the first fatal shell to land in Turkey hit Akçakale, a town in the southeast of the country, killing five Turkish citizens. In the Turkish town of Hacıpaşa, shelling and gunfire can be heard from the Syrian town of Azmarin frequently.

This October, I returned to the border more than a year after my initial visit. Back then, there had been the sad, scared faces of refugees. Now, I arrived in the Turkish border town of Hacıpaşa to see smoke from explosions rising from a nearby Syrian village. The sounds of a Syrian regime helicopter could be heard in the evening when Hacıpaşa was quiet. The fighting has been going on for at least a week now, the residents say. People of Hacıpaşa are scared of the conflict bursting in to their village. Wounded fighters from Azmarin are brought to Turkey through Hacıpaşa, they say. Many gather on rooftops to watch the fighting on the other side. Yet, most people refuse to move out from a place they have called home for most of their lives.

“I don’t want to move. My family is here,” Ahmet, 62, a resident of Hacıpaşa said. According to Ahmet, none of the residents have left to the far larger city of Antakya, further away from the border, despite the fighting.

Guveççi, another village by the Syrian border, has had its share of the Syrian conflict overflowing to the Turkish side of the border. A few shells have hit the village and the residents are getting tired of the unwanted attention the village is getting from journalists and Syrian fighters alike. They feel safe with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is in command of the village across the border from them, but Syrian president’s Bashar al-Assad’s army scares them, they said.

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“We are not scared of the free Syrian army. When Assad’s army is here then we are scared. I am afraid for my family,” a Turkish man from the village said.

As shells explode across the border from Hacıpaşa and the sounds of gunfire split the air, the children of migrant workers, who have come to pick cotton, run in the fields and play. Life must go on no matter what is happening on the other side. Yet, many of the children here have psychological problems, said Hayretin Yıldız, 32, a Turkish citizen from Hacıpaşa, whose mother is Syrian. Yıldız has taken matters in to his own hands due to lack of action from the Turkish government. He claims to go and fight to the other side of the border because he “wants do something to help.”

Many Turkish citizens living close to the conflict areas wish that the Turkish government would do more to keep them safe. Yet most Turks don’t want war. According to a survey conducted by the Ankara-based Institute of Strategic Thinking this summer, around 60 percent of Turks are against Turkey getting militarily involved in Syria.

“We don’t want Turkey to go fighting. Syria’s problem is an inside-Syria problem,” said a 18-year-old man from Guveççi. He is afraid he has to go to the army soon.

Yıldız and Ahmet from Hacıpaşa agree. “What would Turkey do there?” ❀