

Basmane, Izmir: A Microcosm of Migratory Hierarchies and Unequal Access to Rights in Turkey.

4 January 2026.



View of a street in Basmane.

Source for the picture : <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/11/11/izmir-basmane-dunun-ermeniy-ve-rum-mahallesi-bugun-avrupa-ya-goc-yolunda-bir-durak-video>

Basmane as a Mirror of Migratory Inequalities in Turkey.

Located in the heart of Izmir's old city, the neighborhood of Basmane has, over the past decade, become one of Turkey's main migratory crossroads. Historically shaped by commercial circulation, internal mobility, and the presence of former Jewish and Armenian communities, it has, since the 2010s, developed into one of the central nodes of clandestine crossings to Greece and Europe. As maritime routes have closed and controls have intensified, the neighborhood, once a simple stopover before departure, has transformed into a prolonged space of residence where migrant populations with profoundly unequal administrative statuses coexist (see [Cairn, Hommes & Migrations, 2023/4](#)). Syrians under temporary protection, Afghans awaiting registration, Pakistanis often in semi-regular situations, and African migrants almost systematically lacking residence permits all intersect in a dense urban space where rights, services, and safety are distributed according to an implicit but extremely rigid hierarchy.

This study argues that Basmane offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe the migratory hierarchies produced by Turkey's asylum regime and the inequalities that result from them (for a detailed discussion on structural stratification, see [ScienceDirect, Migration, 2024](#)).

Administrative status decisively shapes access to resources, the possibility of moving freely, exposure to policing, access to employment, residential stability, and, more broadly, the ability to transform a constrained space into a place that can be inhabited. In this context, Turkish and international civil society organizations endeavor to mitigate these structural inequalities, yet their interventions are constrained by the absence of durable regularization pathways and the persistent political tensions surrounding migration. The following analysis draws upon recent academic scholarship as well as localized research conducted among migrants and association workers in the neighborhood who daily confront the realities of this specialized field.

A Stratified Migratory Space and Strategic Irregularity.

Turkey implements a complex migration regime that categorizes migrants into distinct legal groups, each associated with a specific allocation of rights. Syrians are granted a temporary protection status, established in 2014, which theoretically ensures access to health services, education, and the labor market. Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, and Pakistanis fall under the individual asylum procedure; however, only a fraction manage to register, while many others quickly descend into irregular status.

African migrants, including individuals from Congo, Nigeria, Angola, Cameroon, Eritrea, Somalia, and Senegal, frequently enter on short-term tourist visas before proceeding to Basmane with the intent of crossing into Europe. Once their visas expire, the vast majority become undocumented. Crucially, while African migrants possess the theoretical right to seek international protection (via the DGMM or UNHCR), many strategically opt against applying. The primary motivation is that entering the formal asylum process would necessitate a protracted period of administrative waiting and immobilization, which fundamentally conflicts with their immediate goal of mobility and onward transit to Europe. This rejection of official status is a deliberate strategic choice to maintain circulation, though it simultaneously exposes them to perpetual risk.

These hierarchical statuses have profound concrete impacts on daily existence. Registered Syrians can, in theory, access public hospitals or enroll their children in school, a framework that, while not eliminating discrimination, provides a minimum institutional safety net. Afghans occupy an ambiguous zone: access to healthcare or schooling is often inconsistent, varying based on the tolerance level found in each specific locality. African migrants, lacking any legal documentation, remain largely invisible to public institutions. Within this structure, Syrians hold an intermediate position : their temporary protection grants certain rights, but authorities prohibit them from leaving their registered province. A Syrian registered in Gaziantep and residing in Izmir can thus be arrested and returned to his province of origin, creating a constant form of administrative insecurity. Furthermore, this prohibition on mobility acts as a critical institutional barrier for all applicants : the pursuit of international protection is immediately declined if a migrant is apprehended while attempting to cross the border to Greece or Europe. Even if successful, protection recipients are often assigned to a different satellite city by the DGMM, which most migrants reject due to better work prospects in Izmir. Should migrants refuse to relocate to the assigned city, their international protection request is cancelled, and their children lose access to the public school system.

African migrants live in complete clandestinity. Poor Turkish residents of the neighborhood, often internal migrants themselves, share material precariousness with the Syrians but retain, as citizens, an unevenly accessible but existent right to public services. The result is intense social fragmentation within a small urban space.

Basmane as a Site of Structural Violence and Survival Economies.

View of the Harmandali Removal Center.



Source for the picture : <https://bianet.org/haber/no-doctors-no-quarantine-no-hygiene-products-in-harmandali-removal-center-223181>

While legal status shapes the overall characteristics of life in Basmane, the neighborhood's economic conditions impose another set of constraints that affect all migrant groups. The local economy relies heavily on informality, particularly in textile workshops located roughly fifteen minutes from the main square. Syrians, Afghans, and Africans are employed as day laborers for wages significantly below the legal minimum, with the lack of work permits deepening their dependence on these precarious jobs and subjecting them to persistent exploitation.

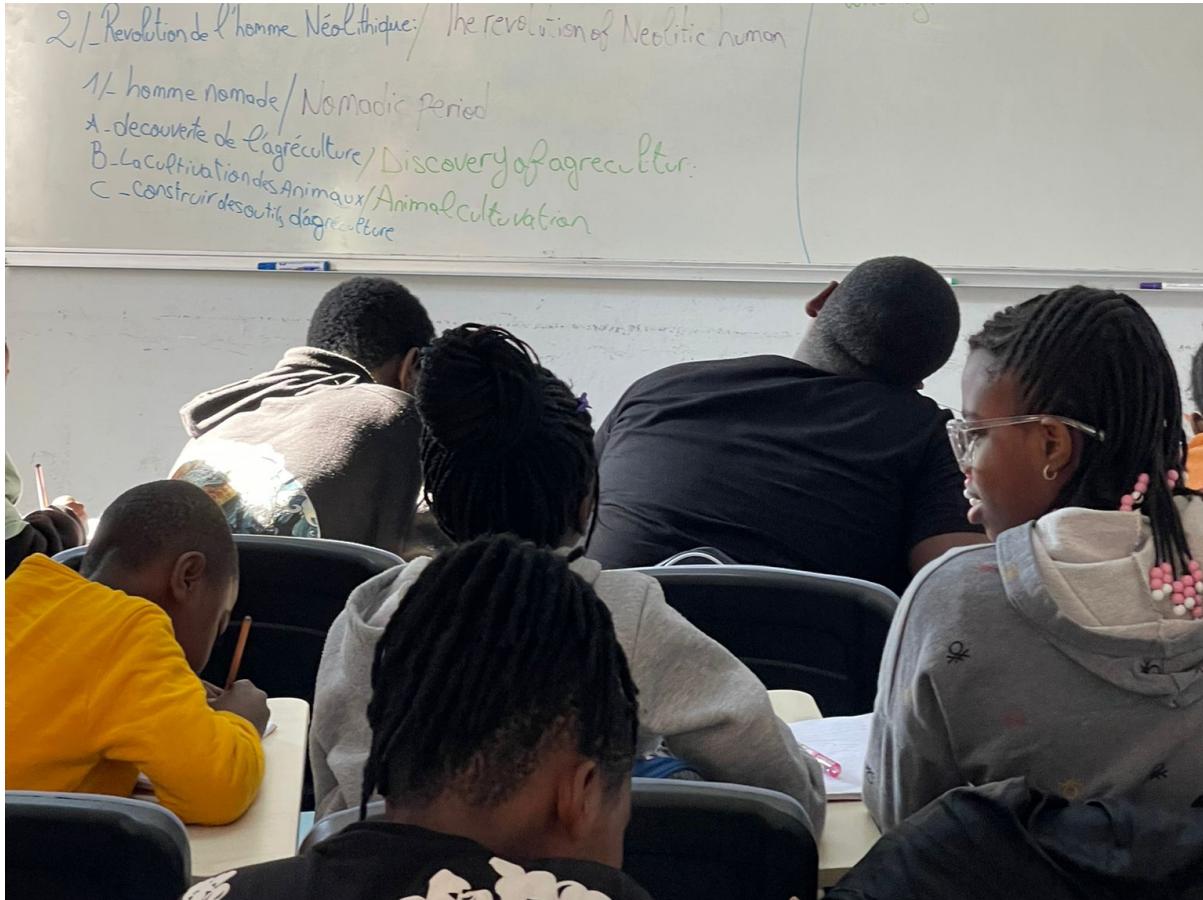
The police presence is characterized by ambivalence : irregular migrants, particularly Africans, live in constant apprehension of controls. Their skin color renders them immediately conspicuous, exposing them to frequent racialized policing. Furthermore, African migrants experience the highest incidence of direct racist acts in the Basmane area. This level of discrimination is so severe that children who initially manage to enroll in school often prematurely drop out due to pervasive harassment and social difficulties linked to their racialized status.

When apprehended, irregular migrants are often transferred to removal centers (detention centers) such as Harmandalı. Conditions within these centers are widely condemned for violating fundamental human rights, citing overcrowding, inadequate care, and limited legal counsel. Consequently, the majority of detained migrants, upon release, suffer from serious health ailments or remain psychologically traumatized for months, severely impairing their ability to pursue their migratory projects or achieve minimal stability. These conditions create fertile ground for smuggling networks, which remain active in Basmane despite increased surveillance, leading many migrants to settle in Izmir against their own initial expectations.

Unable to progress toward Europe and often lacking the resources to attempt a crossing, they become trapped in a prolonged immobility, obliged to work informally to finance new attempts while their low wages continually delay the possibility of departure.

Structural violence thus extends beyond policing and exploitation. It lies in the accumulation of administrative obstacles, the indefinite temporality of waiting, and the absence of legal horizons for the most vulnerable. Basmane becomes a place where people live in the hope of leaving but where Europe grows farther away as the city becomes, often reluctantly, a long-term place of residence.

Civil Society Organizations: A Necessary but Fragile Safety Net.



Picture of a class room, in the Biz Ubuntu association's headquarters (Basmene, Izmir). The photo was taken by Badi Bissen, a member of the association.

Despite the limits of the Turkish state in providing migrant protection, Basmene hosts a dense concentration of local and international associations. Organizations such as ASAM, İnsان-Der, and the Turkish Red Crescent distribute food, clothing, psychological support, and limited legal assistance. These organizations play a vital role for African migrants, who lack any state protection. They allow them to survive during periods of unemployment and often constitute their only point of contact with institutional actors.

Yet these organizations sometimes reproduce, despite themselves and their very best intentions, preexisting migratory hierarchies. Some exclude Syrians from food aid on the grounds that they are now settled, while Africans, who are seen as more vulnerable, are more eligible. These distinctions underscore the degree to which perceptions of migrants shape their access to solidarity, even within the humanitarian sector.

A notable and more recent response to these systemic gaps comes from smaller, community-based initiatives, often concentrating on the most marginalized populations. For example, Biz Ubuntu,

recently established in Basmane, focuses its intervention exclusively on African migrants, many of whom are Francophone. This association offers vital educational support to children systematically excluded from the Turkish public school system due to their irregular status (a status often resulting from the administrative cancellation discussed earlier). The organization is primarily founded and staffed by experienced aid workers alongside new volunteers who contribute to its activities. Furthermore, it incorporates a specific women's empowerment component, furnishing mothers with necessary networks and skills training. This highly targeted strategy is essential as it addresses the linguistic isolation and the double vulnerability faced by irregular African women, thereby creating a specialized, culturally sensitive support structure that public services entirely fail to provide.

Associations, however, cannot substitute for the absence of legal avenues for regularization or the progressive closure of safe migration routes. They alleviate immediate suffering without fundamentally altering the underlying legal architecture that initially produces vulnerability.

Basmane as a Laboratory of Contemporary Migratory Hierarchies.

Basmane serves as a laboratory for contemporary migratory hierarchies, exemplifying how Turkey, and broader contemporary migration systems, generate hierarchies based on administrative status. Status determines the capacity to circulate freely, access healthcare, live without fear of arrest, work legally or illegally, and develop a sense of belonging. In Basmane, these dimensions converge to create a profoundly segmented social space. Racialized perceptions reinforce this segmentation. The high visibility of African migrants assigns them a unique position in the local imagination: unlike Syrians, whose presence has been normalized, they are often perceived as highly foreign, unstable, and potentially threatening. This racialization helps account for the frequency of police controls, the intensity of negative stereotypes, and the high rate of school attrition among their children. Beyond the neighborhood, Basmane's situation is intrinsically linked to a wider geopolitical context: the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement transformed Turkey into a buffer zone, resulting in increased immobilization for migrants. Mobility restrictions imposed on Syrians and other foreigners reflect an externalization strategy designed to limit arrivals into Europe. The inequalities observed in Basmane are therefore not solely produced by the Turkish state but also reflect a global migration regime in which Turkey plays a central role.

Picture of a class room, in the Biz Ubuntu association's headquarters (Basmane, Izmir).

In short,

Basmane emerges as a genuine microcosm of Turkey's migratory hierarchies. The coexistence of groups with fundamentally unequal legal statuses highlights the central role of administrative classification in shaping migratory trajectories, access to rights, and the possibility of living with dignity. Syrians, while covered by a protection regime, live under constant threat of restriction, whereas African migrants, deprived of any status (often due to a strategic choice to preserve mobility), are confined to invisibility, exploitation, and the fear of police intervention and the traumatic conditions of detention centers. Basmane therefore reveals the intrinsic limits of current migration policies, which prioritize deterrence and control at the expense of protection. Understanding this neighborhood allows us to grasp the deeper trends shaping migration governance in Turkey and, more broadly, across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Jean-Baptiste Laborde.



Picture of a class room, in the *Biz Ubuntu* association's headquarters (Basmane, Izmir). The photo was taken by Badi Bissen, a member of the association.

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