



How can we grow together?

Conversations between current and future leaders of the Turkish and Syrian communities



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HOW DID THESE CONVERSATIONS COME ABOUT?

In late 2018 Syrian and Turkish youth leaders in the southern Turkish cities of Gaziantep and Sanliurfa initiated a Dialogue for Social Cohesion. They teamed up in Syrian-Turkish pairs to interview community leaders of both nationalities, aiming to learn more about their hopes and visions for a ‘new Gaziantep’ and a ‘new Sanliurfa’ in which everyone – both newcomers and long-time residents – can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives.

The ideas which the young people found most inspiring are featured in this exhibition, along with their personal reflections about them. They can also be found at peopleindialogue.com.

Through these conversations between young and older leaders, and between people of Turkish and Syrian origin, the Dialogue for Social Cohesion aims to inspire its participants to envision and then help build the kind of future they would like to be part of. By promoting listening, appreciation and respect, it focuses on the best of what is; opens up spaces for imagining what can be; and, by doing this, helps shape what will be.



The Dialogue for Social Cohesion is an initiative of the Education Programme for Syrian Refugees and Host Communities, implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, on behalf of Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The Dialogue is also supported by the GIZ Sector Programme ‘Promoting Gender Equality and Women’s Rights,’ with technical advice provided by the consulting firm management4health.

The following people made this Dialogue for Social Cohesion possible:

- the 48 youth leaders and community leaders from Gaziantep and Sanliurfa who reflected on the meaning of social cohesion in their communities and shared their hopes for the future;
- the team at the Education Programme for Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Gaziantep – Jasmin Dirinpur, Mehmet Akdemir, Ali Almana and Irem Nur Yıldız – for coordinating all aspects of the Dialogue process;
- Anna von Roenne and Karen Birdsall, consultants with management4health, who conceived the Dialogue method, trained the team and guided the creation of the website and exhibition; and
- Ahmad Aljabri, whose photographs of the youth and community leaders have brought the Dialogue to life.

Can you think of an event that’s brought our communities together?



“Some time ago we organised a football tournament. Several teams from our community centers took part and lots of people came to watch. When they arrived, the spectators assumed they’d be supporting their ‘national’ teams, so the Syrians sat on one side of the stadium, and the Turks sat on the other. But at our community centers, Turks and Syrians play together on the same team. At first this really surprised people, but then they got into it. By the end both sides of the stadium were cheering the mixed teams together. For me this is the new Gaziantep!”

Önder Yalçın, Head of Migration Office, Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality



“When I was organising drama workshops with Syrian children, one of them asked me, ‘When we put on this play, will there only be Syrian kids on the stage?’ I really didn’t know what to say. The kid made me think. Then I decided to involve Turkish children too. I have to admit that I was hesitant at the beginning. But listening to Mr Önder, I realised that it’s possible to make this work. I’m really motivated now to help the Syrian and Turkish kids put on a beautiful joint production that they – and we all – can be proud of.”

Hamza Koy, Logistics Student and Creative Drama Trainer

What do you value about the ‘new Gaziantep’?



“When I think of the new Gaziantep, I think of the university. Lots of young Syrians are studying here now, preparing themselves for the future. Someday, when we return to our eternal homeland, these young people will be part of reconstructing it. If we have education, we can do anything. Without it, we’ll be lost. So a lot depends on what’s happening right now at Gaziantep University. It’s not just the key to the future of this area – it’s also the key to the future of Syria.”

Dr Muhammed Vecih Cuma, Head of Turkman Council



“Just like Dr Vecih, my father realised that education is the key to overcoming all kinds of challenges. He grew up as the youngest of nine children. He was good in school and wanted to become a teacher, but my grandfather didn’t want him to go to university. His whole life he’s felt incomplete as a result. When he became a parent he swore that he’d always put his children’s education first. And he has. He’s given my sisters and me the chance to study that he never had.”

Didem Yıldırım, Engineer

What does social cohesion mean to you?



“Building social cohesion is a lot like creating a mosaic. In mosaic art you form a picture by bringing together lots of small pieces of different colors. Once they are placed next to each other, these tiny pieces form something new. With people it’s just the same. Acts of kindness and beauty appear as soon as we start interacting with each other. And despite the differences between us, these connections make all our lives more valuable.”

Fatma Arslan, Mosaic Artist and Teacher



“After the conversation with Fatma, I kept coming back to what she said about social cohesion being like mosaic art. It made me realise that my job is also a bit like creating a mosaic. I teach children with disabilities, and I love what I do. I work with children of all ages and backgrounds and needs. Each child is different, just like the pieces of a mosaic. There are no boundaries of language, religion or nationality between us. Together we form the most beautiful mosaic imaginable.”

Nazmiye Özaslan, Special Needs Teacher and Volunteer

Can sports help to bring our communities together?



“When you’re playing sports, national and religious differences disappear. I’ll give you an example. Not long ago I was playing in the finals of a table tennis championship against a Turkish coach. Many of the Turkish young people who I’ve been coaching here in Gaziantep were there watching. And it was amazing – lots of them were supporting me, not my Turkish opponent! I’ll never forget this moment. This is how I’d love to see the new Gaziantep.”

Zelal Mualem, Syrian Table Tennis Champion



“Sports really breaks down barriers. One day I went to play football with some other Syrian guys. When we got to the pitch, some Turkish guys were already warming up. We agreed to play against each other – whichever team scored first would get to use the pitch. But after we’d started the game we realised we were all having fun. So we mixed up our two teams and kept playing. That was my first real interaction with Turkish people in Turkey.”

Ahmad Aljabri, Journalism Student and Photographer

How can we overcome the pain of war?



“I remember a time when I went to an event for Syrian orphans. I took my own kids with me so that they could get to know these children who have had quite different lives. It was wonderful to see how quickly they started playing together and became friends. People have been through terrible times in this war. It is when we get together, face to face, that we can share some of this pain and connect.”

Mahmut Kaya, Sociology Department, Harran University



“I’m a mother and the conversation with Professor Mahmut made me think about the toll that conflict has on children. But also about how resilient they are. It’s easy for children to make friends and have fun. I think about my own kids and how music and dancing brings them to life. It doesn’t take much to make a child smile. We need more events like this one which bring children together.”

Birsan Banu Uyguner, Student, Sociology Department

What is changing for women in the ‘new Sanliurfa’?



“Once when I was in the tent city during the first years of the war, a Syrian mother tried to give her newborn baby to a colleague of mine who doesn’t have children. ‘You can take her. She can be yours,’ the woman said. This is how desperate some mothers were then. But the situation has changed. Now we have community centers, and mothers who were ready to give away their babies to us years ago are now working as part of our team.”

Buket Arvad Singan, Doctor



“There are sufferings in life that destroy women, and sufferings that make them grow. Women are exposed to the dirtiest face of war – being forced to migrate, being homeless, losing loved ones, having to play the role of both mother and father. Every direction you look you can see women being emotionally exploited and deprived of their rights. But there are also women like Dr Buket. She gives me hope for the future of our world.”

Zülûf Ayneli, Student, Sociology Department

What can be done when integration leads to conflict?



“At the school where I work the Syrian and Turkish teachers have learned to cooperate as a team, and this feels great. But a friend of mine who teaches at a different school almost quit her job because of the way her colleagues treated her. My husband and I went with her to see the principal. He made us feel welcome, listened to my friend’s concerns, apologised for what happened and helped to solve the problems. Maybe it sounds simple, but listening and speaking respectfully are often all it takes to find amicable solutions to all kinds of problems.”

Samar Jamal, School Principal



“I was quite struck by the way Samar helped her teacher friend who felt badly treated by her Turkish colleagues. She supported her to explain the situation to her principal. And he understood and took action to improve the situation. I realised that dialogue – simply talking to one another – is key to solving many of the issues Gaziantep’s new residents face on their journey towards integration. We have to keep talking and not be too quick to walk away when things get difficult.”

Rahaf Aljaradi, Student, Faculty of Education

What does it take to get people to connect?



“At the community center where I work we decided to offer an Arabic language class. We didn’t know if anyone would be interested, but we just tried. And I am glad we did. I was surprised to see how many Turkish people of all different ages want to learn Arabic! For me, as a language teacher, there is nothing as beautiful as seeing people becoming closer by learning each other’s languages.”

Seba Hamsho, Teacher



“I knew exactly what Mrs Seba meant when she described the feeling you get when you see people growing closer by learning each other’s language. I can speak Turkish fluently and thought I’d use this to help bring people together. So I organised a photography class for Syrian and Turkish teenagers. One day we did a session outside and I saw it happening: everyone forgot about being Syrian or Turkish and just had a great time taking pictures of each other.”

Zekeriya Shobek, Activities Facilitator at Community Center

Are women accepted as leaders in the ‘new Sanliurfa’?



“I grew up in a progressive family which values education and women’s rights. From early on I knew I was on a path to leadership. It hasn’t been easy, though. I’ve struggled a lot along the way. In this society, many men can’t accept that women play important roles in all kinds of fields – medicine, astronomy, biology, you name it. But the fact is, women are everywhere and always will be.”

Behiye Nur Kurtoglu, Coordinator, Youth Branch of a Political Party



“I’m really impressed by women, like Ms Behiye, who face difficult situations and don’t give up. I think this is because of my mother. She’s been through a lot in life. And even though she couldn’t go to school, she’s always told me that I have to study and stand on my own feet if I want to achieve something. Now that I’m a student, she is my biggest supporter and my greatest inspiration.”

Merve Turgut, History Student and Volunteer

What do we need to create a ‘new Gaziantep’?



“I spent my childhood in Kilis, right on the border with Syria. It’s been impossible to remain indifferent as devastating things have happened right next to where I grew up. Reality doesn’t change if we ignore it, and life teaches us to adapt. What’s important now is to create spaces for interaction. Maybe we need to talk to each other about our wounds, because this is where understanding and empathy begin.”

Mehmet Nuri Gültekin, Department of Sociology, Gaziantep University



“I used to think that a better Gaziantep was an impossible dream, but I don’t any longer. Because now I realise I’m not the only one with this dream. I agree with Professor Mehmet that empathy is the starting point. Empathy grows when there is interaction, and sharing. We need to listen to people’s stories and, yes, to hear about their wounds. I often think about what Warsan Shire wrote in her poem ‘Home’:

*no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.”*

Cansu Altingöz, NGO Worker

What's inspired you to stand up for women?



“When I was a young teacher, one of my students had such problems at home that she would sometimes come to stay with me. Once she came looking for me when I was on vacation. She slept on my doorstep for two days before finally giving up and going home. That night she committed suicide. After this tragedy I swore to help women in difficult situations. I’m inspired by women who seek their own path. One small step can lead to a thousand more, so let’s make sure that nothing stands in their way.”

Ayşegül Çelebioğlu, Vocational Training Teacher and Activist



“Ayşegül’s story made me think of a difficult time from my own childhood, when my father was really struggling. Things were so bad he even thought of suicide. Around that time he wrote us a letter. He said that, if necessary, his sons should be pulled out of school to start working so that his daughter could finish her education. Just like Ayşegül, he’s always believed that women should play active roles in our community. I think so, too. When women believe in themselves – and when we believe in them – the world will be a better place”

Eren Baysalman, Graduate, Business Administration

What gives you hope for the future?



“I’ve spent half my life in Syria and the other half here in Gaziantep. I feel very much at home in this city and at the community center where I work. We’re accepted here. I’ll give you an example. Recently I saw a social circus performance which brought together Turks and Syrians, both kids and adults. They were laughing, flying their flags, and simply having a great time together – not because they had to, but because they wanted to. Moments like this give me real hope for the future – for a new Gaziantep where there are no divisions between the people who live here.”

Adil Şan, Librarian and Social Media Coordinator at a Community Center



“The way I see it, the world we live in is like a huge garden. And no one is taking away anyone else’s share. The most important thing is that we simply accept one another. Mr Adil talked about Syrian and Turkish people in Gaziantep doing things together because they *want* to, not because they have to. I find this great. This is a real sign that social cohesion in Gaziantep is growing.”

Özge Gögebakan, Teacher

What has motivated you to support social cohesion between our communities?



“I remember a time when I visited the refugee camp to see if I could help out. I found two young kids alone in their tent, their mother and brother had gone out to work. When I asked if they were OK they said they were hungry, so I got some food and we ate and played together. Soon there was happiness all around. The love and compassion you give others reflects back on you and it feels like sunshine caressing your face.”

Salih Hartavioğlu, Faculty of Engineering, Harran University



“The story about the two kids took me back to a day when I was in high school. My family was going through a rough patch and often we didn’t have any money. One day I came home from school hungry, but there was nothing in the fridge. There was no one at home either. It felt like forever until my mother came home and I could eat something. I know what those two children must have felt like. No matter how different we think we are, there are so many things we have in common.”

Leyla Yazgi, Economics Graduate

Which place do you think represents the ‘new Gaziantep’?



“For me, the schools where Syrian and Turkish children are studying together represent the best of what’s happening in Gaziantep today. Schools are where we’re fermenting the ‘dough’ of the future. If we want to build hope, we must sow the seeds right here, among children and teachers. If we dream of a future together, schools are the places where we can jointly create this future. They offer the space, the time and the opportunity for us to make the very best out of what we have.”

Hasan Esici, Faculty of Education, University of Hasan Kalyoncu



“I was impressed by Mr Hasan Esici’s passion for schools and his belief in what they can achieve for social cohesion. Even though he is an academic at the university, he’s still deeply interested in schools – his heart is in it! He really cares about what he does. I hope that someday, when I’m a teacher, I will be just as passionate about my work. For me, this conversation was like a light, showing the way toward my own future.”

Esin Yigit, Student, Department of Early Childhood Education

How far are we on our journey towards social cohesion?



“When I look at Gaziantep today, I see our ‘new citizens’ who are living with us and who are part of us. I recently attended an event where a film about an immigrant was shown. It was a really emotional film. At one point I looked over and saw Syrian and Turkish women crying and sharing tissues with each other. That moment really struck me. When we fully accept our new citizens and open ourselves up to them completely, we’ll have become a really beautiful society.”

Damla Deniz Cengiz, Coordinator, Art Center



“You could say, ‘It’s just a movie. How much difference can it make?’ But the situation Deniz described is important, because it shows the power of emotions to bring different people together. We don’t have to have the same skin color, or gender, or nationality in order to laugh or cry together. It doesn’t matter what the situation is, we can always find common ground on the basis of shared feelings - as long as we’re willing to overcome our prejudices.”

Emre Budak, Student, Department of Mathematics

What matters to you in your work?



“As a journalist my first priority has always been to make children happy. Why? Because children are innocent. They don’t care about national borders, religions or languages. They know what really matters: love, kindness and being able to laugh!

There’s a project I’m very proud of. It’s called ‘Your City, Your Colours’. An artist made drawings of different neighbourhoods of Gaziantep and we turned it into a colouring book. It got distributed to 65,000 Turkish and Syrian children across the city. They loved it! 65,000 happy children - what more can one ask for?”

İhsan Köklü, Journalist



“Ever since I was little, I dreamed of becoming a teacher. I was so proud when I finally qualified. But on my first day, I almost lost my courage. I had no idea how to communicate with the Syrian children at the school. Then a little Syrian girl walked up to me, hugged me and smiled – and I did the same. It felt like we were speaking the same language with our smiles. This little girl made me realise that I’ll be learning a lot during my teaching journey.”

Pınar Yıldırım, Teacher

Is there a place in Sanliurfa that connects the Turkish and Syrian communities?



“The shrine of the prophet Ibrahim, peace be upon him, is very special. It’s a spiritual place which brings relief to your heart. When I go there I feel a deep belonging to this land, its language and thoughts. Any differences between Syrians and local people disappear at the shrine. It feels like we’re one people.”

Lemis Alrehbe, Poet



“For me it’s a hall at the municipal building where Syrian and Turkish artists meet and share their work. I feel appreciated there. We’re invited to exhibitions and given the chance to show our work. No one there cares about nationality. Art is like the universal language that brings us together.”

Suzan Mislim, Artist

What has enabled you to become a leader?



“My father once told me, ‘If we were soldiers and you were in my troop, I’d never worry about watching my back. I trust you completely.’ He’s given me huge support on my life journey and it’s made all the difference. Sometimes people don’t react positively when they see me, a woman, in charge of the youth and cultural center and attending important meetings. But I’ve always been proud of myself that I can represent Sanliurfa’s women on these occasions.”

Mercan Ersöz, Sociologist and Coordinator of Sanliurfa Youth & Cultural Center



“When Ms Mercan told me about her journey as a woman in our society, it made me think about the role of parents. It really surprised me to hear about a woman in Sanliurfa getting such support from her father. I admire him for this. Women in our city face a lot of difficult situations and I see that support from parents can make a big difference in overcoming them. Women can achieve so much if we don’t stand in their way.”

Garip Ay, Public Relations Student and Trainer

What strikes you about the ‘new Sanliurfa’?



“After I came to Turkey, I found that people from many different backgrounds – Turks, Arabs and Kurds – live in Sanliurfa. Yet there is harmony here between these groups. I saw this very clearly two years ago, when both Syrians and Turks gathered, as one people, in Rabiaa Square, during the failed coup attempt. It was as if the Syrians were saying, ‘We lost our home and don’t want the same to happen to this dear country.’”

Ramazan Ömer, College of Theology, Harran University



“When I arrived in Turkey as a refugee, I assumed that the different communities here all have their own issues. But just as Dr Ramazan describes, the events which took place showed me the unity of the Syrian and Turkish communities. It’s only borders that divide us. I’ve been really motivated ever since to continue my studies. I’ve started to feel that I belong to this country, and being a refugee won’t stop me from contributing to it.”

Selva Mislîm, Student, College of Theology

What do people need to be able to integrate in a new place?



“Everything I know about integration I learned from my mother. She’s Turkish, but lived for 40 years in Syria. She merged completely into Syrian society. When I came to Turkey because of the war, I took inspiration from her. I rented a house in a Turkish neighborhood where we were the first foreign family. I worked hard to integrate with our neighbors. And it paid off. As more refugees arrived, our family became a bridge between the two populations.”

Fahima Ali, NGO Worker



“Fahima’s story reminded me of how a Turkish professor showed me what it means to help people integrate into a new society. After I came here I had to improve my Turkish to be able to study, but I didn’t want to lose a whole year doing language courses. Professor Hasan offered his help and tutored me and another student in Turkish. Now I’m studying engineering at the university. It’s because of him that I’ve started to help Syrians - not just to study in Turkish universities, but to engage in Turkish society, too.”

Mohammed Ali, Student, Department of Engineering

What does the ‘new Sanliurfa’ feel like?



“What does the new Sanliurfa feel like? It’s like sitting down at a table filled with lots of different dishes. Even though the food is all different colors and none of it matches, your senses and appetite come alive. Sanliurfa today is such a cultural mix, filled with different traditions, ideas and cultures. We’re just like a big salad! Maybe green doesn’t go with red, and red doesn’t go with purple, and purple doesn’t go with yellow, but the salad looks beautiful.”

Şadi Bilal, Teacher



“I remember the first few days that I spent in Turkey. Everything was totally foreign, but at the same time so attractive. I was surrounded by faces I’d never seen before and I knew I wanted to be part of this community – not as a refugee, but as a citizen. I worked hard on this. I studied the language until I could speak like a local and eventually I became a Turkish citizen. I’m proud of what I’ve achieved. But listening to Mr Şadi, I realise that integration doesn’t mean changing who you are. Each of us brings something to this beautiful cultural mix that is Sanliurfa.”

Haşim Ferhanfeyad, Volunteer, GAP Youth Association

What does it mean to belong somewhere?



“I heard a story once that really stuck with me. A woman with a Turkish father and a Syrian mother explained that she wasn’t eligible for Syrian citizenship because in Syria nationality is inherited through the father, not the mother. She thought of Syria as her country and talked about how upsetting it was that she couldn’t live there, just because the ‘wrong’ parent happened to be Syrian.”

Rim Vefai, NGO Worker



“This woman’s story made me think of all the Syrians around the world who are longing for a home where they feel welcome and safe. This Syrian woman is longing for her land, yet is denied citizenship because her father is not Syrian. And at the same time there are so many Syrian youth who fled to other countries, trying to be anything *but* Syrian. It really touches me when I think of Syria and its people who are seeking belonging.”

Süheyla Alazmah, Student, Sociology Department

How can neighbors help one another?



Abdulsallam Utba, Surgeon

“Not long ago, tensions escalated between Syrians and Turks in Şanlıurfa. The mood on the streets was edgy. A group of us from my building – both Turkish and Syrian – got together and decided to visit every single family. All 28 apartments. We talked to them about living together peacefully. Whether Turkish or Syrian, they all received us warmly and wished us good luck. And it worked. There haven’t been any problems in our house.”



Hüsen Utba, Student, Mechanical Engineering Student

“I remember the time that Mr Abdulsalam talked about. In my neighbourhood it was dangerous to go outside even to buy bread. During that time a group of Turkish neighbours visited us and brought us food. They told us not to worry, that we hadn’t done anything wrong, and that the people acting out on the streets were not representative of the Turkish community. They told us that the situation would soon calm down, and it did. I won’t soon forget my neighbours’ act of solidarity.”

What has made a difference for your new life in Turkey?



“I lost my husband in the war and escaped to Sanliurfa with my three daughters. Our life was hard at the beginning. My daughters woke me one night because they were hungry and anxious. At that moment I realised that I had to change something. But I’d just arrived and didn’t know anyone. Then I thought of the neighborhood *muhtar*. I went to him the next morning. Even though he didn’t know me, he helped and found me a job as a translator. Since then I’ve had work. His help allowed me stand on my own feet again and continue my life.”

Nur Alhoca, NGO worker



“I’m now a second-year engineering student, but like most Syrians here I have difficult times behind me. My dad was arrested in Syria and when he was released from prison we came to Turkey. We managed to rent a house, but we had so little money that we couldn’t furnish it. Then one day our Turkish neighbors came to visit and the next thing we knew they had collected furniture for us. We will never forget their support. What’s really incredible is that they didn’t even know us.”

Sarah Alhajmuhammed, Student, Department of Computer Engineering

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