As the borders of Europe slowly expand to include Turkey, the country finds itself in the position of having to strengthen its own walls. With the continuing conflict in Syria, this issue has become urgent. Merve Bedir traces the last 100 years of migration in Turkey, and how it has dealt with varying flows of refugees and immigrants. Away from the refugee camp with its clear borders and rations, Bedir questions the condition of the urban refugee, a precarious existence within a state of exception, and to what degree resistance might be possible.

One of the consequences of the state of emergency declared by the post-9/11 Bush and Blair administrations has been the increasingly harder international policies of immigration and asylum. An agreement signed between Turkey and the EU in December 2013 has made it possible for European countries to send their unwanted asylum seekers to Turkey, to be detained and sent back to their countries of origin. Within the scope of this agreement, Turkey will build six refugee camps and two detention camps by 2015. Back in April 2011, Turkey declared an open door policy concerning the sudden influx of Syrian refugees. As a response to this state of emergency, twenty-one refugee camps have been opened at the border with Syria, hosting around 225,000 refugees under the responsibility of Turkey’s Prime Ministry, Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency [AFAD]. The number of urban refugees from Syria is expected to be more than 750,000 by the end of 2014. Both measures tell us that the thickness of ‘Fortress’ Europe might no longer be the walls between Greece-Bulgaria and Turkey, but Turkey itself might become the border wall of Europe.

Carl Schmitt claims that there can be no functioning legal order without a sovereign authority and that the sovereign is whoever can decide on the state of emergency. The state of emergency is a threat to the state and requires the suspension of the law. If the situation is continuous, the law is continuously suspended, and the law, hence the sovereignty, is sustained. This way, the validity of the legal order [law] is guaranteed, and the sovereign, by being the one who decides on the emergency, positions itself outside and above the legal order.

It would not be completely wrong to say that Turkey is a country where the state of emergency and exception has been continuous. Since the First World War, policy towards migration and refugees has adopted an approach composed of exceptional situations for different occasions and origins of refugees and asylum seekers. The 384,000 people exchanged between Turkey, Greece, and Bulgaria (mübadil) after the First World War, and the immigrants from the former Ottoman borders (muhacir) around the same period have been accepted as ‘same-origin’ in Turkey, and never considered as refugees, although they are the absolute subject of the issue of refuge. Another exceptional situation concerns the guests from Germany, who settled in Turkey between 1933 and 1945 (haymatloz). The academic journal Nature mentions in a volume from 1937: “Many former members of staffs of German universities and other institutes have, as is now well known, either been forced to leave or have voluntarily vacated their posts, for political, racial and other reasons. [...] and we have recently received a list of those who are now working at the University of Istanbul. Among these are Prof. H. Winsterstein [physiology], Prof. M. Brauner [botany], Prof. M. Dember [physicist], Prof. M. von Mieses [mathematics], and nearly thirty others, most of whom have been appointed to chairs in the University of Istanbul.”

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran caused a flow of refugees moving through Turkey, not with the
purpose of residing, but for continuing to Europe and North America. Some of them had to stay in Turkey when NATO closed the refugee administration office in Izmir, and they are still guests in the country. In 1982, Kenan Evren, the president at the time, ordered the relocation of Afghan refugees in the cities of Tokat and Adana, where by now, they are completely settled as Turkish citizens, who can work, vote, etc.

In order to block the Kurdish refugees from entering Turkey, the first flow of 51,000, who fled from Iraq during the First Gulf War, and the potential 600,000 refugees in the Second, Turkey built several camps at the Iraqi side of the border, while the war was still continuing. Until 1994, there have been many other states of exception such as the Bosnian, Bulgarian, and Chechen refugees, who were also welcomed with rules regarding their specific situation. Turkey introduced its first regulation in 1994, however since then, in addition to this regulation, several [sometimes short-term] circulars have not necessarily cancelled the regulation, but suspended, changed and altered its implementation temporarily, within the limitations of these decisions.

Turkey’s regulations on refugees adopts a transitory approach, where the asylum seekers settle temporarily in one of the thirty-six different cities in Turkey, on the basis of registration and periodical reporting at the police department and UNHCR. This is until they are repatriated or sent to a third country by UNHCR with refugee status. This umbrella policy has brought together the phenomenon of ‘urban refugees’, together with other illegal immigrants.

Going back to Schmitt, the basic principle of politics is the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and the spatial order of the world is conceptualized based on the division of ‘us/inside’ and ‘them/outside’, where the state of exception is geared towards the outsider. Agamben constructs his argument on Schmitt’s theory up until this point, when contrary to Schmitt, he suggests that the state of exception is about the border between us and them, where life and law and the position of insider and outsider get blurry and become indistinguishable. Urban refugees in Turkey live in such a border, where their role in urban settings changes from guest to hostage, exile, and parasite.

The Camp
Camp is the space where the continuous state of exception, hence continuous suspension of the law, is present. In the camp, human beings exist only in bare life and are vulnerable against the sovereign. As the logic of the camp becomes an assumption accepted by most of society, the idea of bare life is extended beyond the camp’s walls. The camp replaces the city. In their analysis of Remus and Romulus, the myth of the City of Rome, Diken and Laustsen dissect the elements of the camp: The walls symbolize sovereignty, the transgression of the walls of the city represent the shape of the exception, humans and wolves are the biopolitical zone of indistinction between culture and nature, the exception as the rule and the camp as the principle of organization. In the
Nusaybin Tent City has 2,000 tents with a capacity of 6,000 people. It is in operation since July 2013.
Harran Container City has 2,000 container units, in service since January, 2013. The camp hosts 13,540 people.

camp, the sovereign creates bare life in order to defend the security, health, and well-being of society – treating its own citizens as potential enemies and outsiders for sustaining its sovereignty. Here, the camp creates a legal territory of ambiguity, where the citizens are excluded from their society and political being, and reduced to the form of bare life, a purely biological state.

In Turkey, the term ‘guest’ has established an ambivalent context for asylum seekers, where, as Agamben explains, the borders of inside versus outside become blurry. But also a variety of relationships have been developed among asylum seekers, locals, and other internal immigrants, sometimes being enemies of each other, while at other times mobilizing against a common enemy. At this point, the notion of bare life needs to be investigated, since the refugees can act politically. Two questions mark the conclusion of this text: Do the urban refugees, who have been settled in the thirty-six cities of Turkey also live in camps, but without visible walls and borders? And contrary to what Agamben suggests with bare life in the camp, is resistance against the sovereign actually possible within the state of exception?

7 ‘German Refugees at the University of Istanbul’, News, Nature 139, 01 May 1937.