



TURKEY: ACCOUNT OF A DEFEAT

After three years of attempts, we are moving the project to a new country. The lessons we learned from the defeat in Turkey enabled the success of our schools in northwestern Syria, Kenya, and DR Congo.

On March 16, 2020, we opened our school in Gaziantep, Turkey. A few days later, the country went into lockdown to limit the spread of COVID-19. Today, two years after the first and only opening of the project, we accept defeat and look to the future by transferring all the resources and funds collected so far to a new school.

Transparency and honesty have always been two core values that distinguish Still I Rise. From the very beginning in 2018, we have been committed to showing our work in its entirety, describing the field in which we operate as true to the facts as possible. This means reporting our expenditures accurately, recounting our victories step by step, but also - or, perhaps, most importantly - presenting our defeats just as clearly.

The truth is, we have tried every single option to reopen our school in Turkey, never leaving anything to chance, but we have failed. We are not going to beat around the bush. The following account seeks to describe every event, every mistake, every abuse experienced in the past few years, to offer a comprehensive view of the mission, and how its failure has enabled us to learn crucial lessons and thus open globally recognized schools in Northwest Syria, Kenya, and DR Congo. After the last consultation with lawyers, we can finally talk about the most important failure - but also the most important lesson - in the history of Still I Rise so far.

In 2018, we opened our first school in Samos, Greece. We did it out of necessity. The migrant children living in the island hotspot had no access to public schooling, and there was no other organization to provide for their education, protection, and defense of their human rights, so we decided to take action.

Already in the first weeks after the opening, we realized how hungry they were for knowledge and how much willpower, energy, and commitment they would bring to their school desks every day. Along with this incredible energy came the stories. "I used to sew these T-shirts in Turkey", one of our fifteen-year-old students told us one day in front of a shop window. "I came to Turkey when I was 12 years old, and we all used to work in a textile company, bent over the sewing machine 12 hours a day. I will never go back to that life".

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Forced to migrate as children and already able to speak 3 or 4 languages, these boys were stuck in a refugee camp, on a remote Greek island, living in an environment with no respect for their dignity and uncertain future prospects. The idea of an international school was born with them: we wanted to create an institute of such quality as to overcome any boundary or identity document. “What can we do to protect today’s migrants from the trauma of crossing by boat, and the humiliation they experience daily in the Greek hotspot?”. The answer came naturally: to open a school in Turkey, capable of awarding the most recognized diploma in the world, so as to restore their inalienable right to freedom in determining their present and future.

On October 8, 2019, a delegation from Still I Rise launched the Turkish mission. After twenty days of visits to various locations around the country and meetings with dozens of humanitarian organizations, on October 28, we settled in Istanbul, the host city for the highest number of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Here we hired one of the most prestigious law firms and, following their advice, contacted the city hall to present our project. On October 31, we were welcomed by the municipal division in charge of Turkish-European relations. Immediately after presenting the project, we had the opportunity to meet with the mayor of the district, who welcomed us with full honors. Here, the mayor’s team endorsed our initiative and offered us full support for the school’s fulfillment. It was the mayor himself who appointed his ‘construction expert’ to support us in finding the building.

In the following days, the municipality kept its promise with considerable logistical and competitive support, allowing us to visit a wide variety of vacated buildings throughout the district, and even offering us free use of them. It was at this point that we realized that all the buildings in question were municipal property, which conflicted with our policy of independence from government agencies. Relations began to sour when we expressed our desire to continue the research alone. On November 11, after an independent search, we rented the most suitable building for the project.

The breaking point occurred when the city hall’s so-called ‘construction expert’ tried to impose his construction company on us to renovate the school building. Faced with our refusal, they started to intimidate us: they would never allow us to open the school without him. After cutting ties with the municipality, we carried out an independent search, then hired a construction company of our choice on December 6, 2019.

The renovation work lasted only five days. On December 11, police raided the building, stopping everything under the pretext of checking workers’ permits, despite the fact that the site manager assured that everything was in order. A few days later, we received a phone call from municipal officials, inviting us for a meeting outside the city hall. During that meeting, they laid their cards on the table: they would never allow us to resume work or obtain any permits from the Ministry of Education, except on their terms. If we

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dismissed the construction company we chose in favor of the one they specified, we would be granted municipal funding of more than a hundred thousand euros for renovation costs. This would have also made it easier for us to obtain permits to open the school. In return, they demanded to personally choose school staff, students, and teaching content, in spite of Still I Rise's policies about hiring, independence, and transparency, and all still under our banner.

We were facing a pivotal decision, not only for the mission in Turkey, but for the entire history of our organization. On the one hand, we could have accepted their offer, cashed in a major grant, achieved the goal without any more obstacles, and sold out our project to what can only be called a state mafia. On the other hand, we could only admit defeat and start from scratch. We could have chosen to cooperate with them, and everything would have been easier. But we didn't. It was the hardest decision we ever had to make, but it was the best one we could make, and it made all the difference.

On January 3, 2020, to preserve our most essential values and the donor funds as well, we moved the project to the other end of the country: Gaziantep, on the Syrian border. Here we started all over again, from studying the context, to building the network for collaborations, to finding the building. On February 4, we signed the lease for a new building to be converted into an international school. On February 28, we entered into a partnership with Bonyan, a Turkish-Syrian humanitarian organization that would support us in the early stages of project implementation. Finally, on March 16, we opened the doors of Beraber, our school in Turkey. It was an unforgettable day.

The magic only lasted a week. Then the lockdown happened, and the whole world came to a standstill.

It was indeed because of the forced closure that we redirected our attention to where we could still make a difference. First, on August 28, 2020, we opened Ma'an, our first school in northwestern Syria; then, on January 4, 2021, Kenya's Still I Rise International School-Nairobi, the world's first international school for refugee children.

Meanwhile, between August and November 2020, a new delegation from Still I Rise traveled to Gaziantep to try to reopen the school. We had already hired a principal and the entire teaching staff when the Turkish government, once again, ordered the closure of schools to contain the second wave of the pandemic. On December 14, we were forced to dissolve our partnership with Bonyan which, in the meantime, was downsizing operations due to a shortage of funds and a general restructuring within the organization.

Between 2021 and 2022, we kept trying to reopen, never losing hope, even in the face of sinister opposition. In Gaziantep, when we went to the Ministry of Education to apply for

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the necessary permits to operate independently, without any partners, the officer in charge asked us for a bribe. Faced with our refusal, he declared that they would never allow us to reopen. So, we hired one of the greatest experts on international cooperation in Turkey, hoping to break the deadlock. Together, we contacted more than twenty top law firms across the country to find a legitimate way to overcome rampant corruption and achieve the goal. Yet, despite all our efforts, the Ministry of Education never issued the permits we requested, relegating our application to endless bureaucratic limbo.

Finally, in May 2022, we hired one last team of lawyers, this time on the direct advice of the Italian Ambassador to Turkey. It was the Italian Embassy's law firm that took charge of our case, reviewed all documents, analyzed the harassment and abuse we had suffered, and then, in July 2022, produced the legal memo that sealed the epilogue of our efforts, struggle, and hope: opening an international school capable of offering the International Baccalaureate pathway would have been impossible unless we were willing to make unacceptable compromises.

And this, we would never have done. Suddenly, it was over. It was all over.

But the truth is, they never wanted us to open. From the Istanbul Mafia to the Ministry of Education in Gaziantep, Turkey has tried to control, hinder, and boycott us because education, here, is considered a matter of national security, and an international school that offered refugees the most recognized course of study in the world free of charge was simply too risky, too inconvenient, too unpredictable to exist.

So, in September 2022, three long years after the birth of this incredible dream, we must accept defeat and admit failure. We gave it a shot. We tried with all of ourselves again and again and again. We didn't succeed. The adverse forces were too great, even for us. One day, when Turkey will be a freer country, perhaps we will try again. But for the time being we have to abandon the mission, and tell the story with the honesty that has always been our hallmark. We battled right to the end, and we lost. But losing in Turkey has allowed us to win elsewhere. Due to Turkey's geographical location, we met the outstanding colleagues with whom we opened the school in northwestern Syria. Because of the lessons learned in Turkey, we have been able to stand up for ourselves, right from the start, in Kenya and DR Congo, never again finding ourselves under anyone's boot, and thus open the schools we promised.

We failed in Turkey, but without this failure we could never have achieved the successes that have made us a world-renowned organization. And this is the greatest truth we have learned in the past three years: defeat is not the opposite of victory, it is an integral part of it.

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These will be our next moves:

- 1) We will give each donor who has invested in the Turkey project the choice of whether:
 - a) To move the donation to a new school that we will open in 2023;
 - b) To move the donation to one of the existing schools;
 - c) To receive a full refund.
- 2) We will collect all resources and materials originally purchased for the school in Turkey in a safe place, in order to keep them until the opening of a new school in another country.
- 3) We will begin a new phase of study and research, networking and careful planning to reformulate the Turkish dream and take our support further, wherever we are needed.

If you have any concerns or questions about your donation, you can write to us at: donazioni@stillirisengo.org. Our team will be ready to support you.

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