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Rooftops in Beirut's Shatila slum. Shatila was initially set up as a camp for Palestinian refugees in 1949, it is now an overcrowded and dilapidated urban landscape that has seen the influx of about 60.000 Syrians and Palestinian-Syrians since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

THE NEW SYRIAN DIASPORA

From Basic Survival Struggles to Aspirations of Success and Integration

By Sam Dagher

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION AND EXCECUTIVE SUMMARY

Field research and interviews for this paper were conducted in Lebanon, Turkey, Germany and the U.S. between June 2021 and December 2021. Syrians have continued to face the same challenges and issues in the ensuing year but their plight has worsened in Lebanon and Turkey, all in the context of a global migration and refugee crisis that has been marked by recurring tragedies particularly in Europe and the Mediterranean region:

Rooftops in Beirut's Shatila slum. Shatila was initially set up as a camp for Palestinian refugees in 1949, it is now an overcrowded and dilapidated urban landscape that has seen the influx of about 60,000 Syrians and Palestinian-Syrians since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

• **November 2022** – Preliminary findings of an investigation into the death of 27 people in the sinking of a migrant boat in the English Channel in November 2021 showed that French maritime authorities failed to respond to several distress calls from the boat[1].

• **November 2022** – A row erupted between Italy and France over which country should take 234 migrants rescued by an NGO in the central Mediterranean off the coast of Libya in October. In the end France said it was making a humanitarian exception by allowing the ship to dock in the south of France[2].

• **November 2022** – At least 20 migrants died when their sail boat sank off the Greek island of Evia[3]. In the first 10 months of 2022 more than 1,200 migrants were dead or missing in the Mediterranean, according to the UNHCR[4]. The number was more than 3,000 in 2021[5].

• **October 2022** – Turkey and Greece traded blame after 92 migrants were discovered stranded and naked at the border between both countries[6]. Twelve migrants had been found frozen to death at the same border in February 2022[7]. Tens of thousands of migrants, mostly Syrians, have attempted to cross to Greece from Turkey, many of them are caught by the Greek side and pushed back to Turkey.

• **September 2022** – At least 94 people mostly Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians died when their small smuggling boat sank off the coast of the Syrian city of Tartous as it was attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Italy[8].

The number of people who have attempted to make the treacherous crossing from Lebanon to Europe across the Mediterranean has more than doubled in 2022[9].

• **May 2022** – Seventy-six migrants were presumed dead after their boat, which departed Libya, sank off the coast of Tunisia[10].

• **February 2022** – Russia invaded Ukraine and provoked another major refugee crisis in Europe. The UNHCR has recorded 7.9 million Ukrainian refugees all over Europe as of December 6, 2022[11].

1 Abdelhak El Idrissi and Julia Pascual, "Death of 27 Migrants in Channel: Investigators Consider Criminal Charges Against French Rescue Services", Le Monde, November 22, 2022.
2 Claire Gtinois, Allan Kaval, Philippe Jacqué and Julia Pascual, "Ocean Viking Fractures Relationship Between Italy and France", Le Monde, November 11, 2022
3 Elena Becatoros, "Death Toll From Migrant Boat Sinking in Greece Rises to 20", ABC News, November 2, 2022.
4 European Parliament, "Search and Rescue Efforts for Mediterranean Migrants", www.europarl.europa.eu, October 24, 2022.
5 UN News, "Dozens Missing After Migrant Boat Sinks in Aegean Sea -UNHCR", www.news.un.org, August 10, 2022.
6 Samantha Lock, "Greece and Turkey Trade Blame after 92 Naked Migrants Rescued at Border", The Guardian, October 16, 2022.
7 Carlotta Gall and Safak Timur, "12 Migrants Freeze to Death, Stripped by Greek Guards, Turkey Says", The New York Times, February 2, 2022.
8 The Guardian, "Death Toll from Sinking of Lebanon Boat Rises to 94", September 24, 2022.
9 Sally Abou Al Joud, "The New Routes and Rising Numbers of Would-be Migrants Leaving Lebanon", L'Orient Today, September 21, 2022.
10 Emma Bubola, "Dozens of Migrants Die After Boat Sinks Off Tunisian Coast", The New York Times, May 25, 2022.
11 UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation", www.data.unhcr.org, December 6, 2022.

Syrian refugee child cleaning car windshields for money in Bar Elias, Lebanon.

March 2023 marks the 12th anniversary of the Syrian uprising which morphed into a multilayered conflict that has triggered one of the largest humanitarian disasters in modern times. While the war itself appears to be frozen as the country has been de facto partitioned into zones controlled by different belligerents backed by foreign powers, the suffering of Syrians has not ceased. The UNHCR still lists 5.5 million Syrians as "persons of concern" scattered in countries all around Syria [12]. In addition about 7 million Syrians remain internally displaced in Syria with most of them living in dire conditions [13]. The UN's OCHA has categorized 9.6 million Syrians as being in a situation of "severe need" while another 4.6 million are in "extreme need[14]."

So it is no surprise that more than a decade on, Syrians inside the country and those in places like Lebanon and Turkey are doing everything to leave to the West either through resettlement programs or by taking huge risks with smugglers.

Countries like Lebanon and Turkey still operate under the assumption that Syrians will return to Syria soon. The result is that many Syrians in these countries are in a state of limbo unable to lead meaningful lives. In Lebanon, more than half of Syrian refugee children estimated at 660,000 are unable to pursue primary education due to economic hardship[15] amid an alarming rise in poverty and hunger levels for everyone in Lebanon both refugees and non-refugees[16]. This is effectively an entire lost generation of Syrian children that will be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in all forms.

In Turkey, many Syrians are now terrified about being deported to northern Syria, areas controlled by militias loyal to Turkey, for the slightest violation as Turkish officials speak about the need to return at least 1 million Syrians to these areas. Syrians are living in a state of panic and fear unable to plan ahead or think of the future[17].

While living conditions for most Syrians in Germany are exemplary compared to what they have to contend with inside Syria and in countries like Lebanon and Turkey, they face challenges of a different kind. The country's Social Democrat-led government announced in early December 2022 a major overhaul of the country's immigration system that would give many Syrians living in Germany the chance to apply for citizenship after 5 years rather than the current 8 years if they meet certain integration criteria[18]. The changes would also automatically grant citizenship to children born in Germany to at least one parent who has been living in Germany for 5 years or more—Syrian birth rates are far above the German average[19]. Whether these changes end up being implemented or not, the Syrian influx has already changed Germany. The number of Syrians who were naturalized in Germany tripled in 2021 and the number is expected to keep increasing[20]. But there are critical questions for which there are no answers yet: have most Germans reconciled themselves to the idea that many Syrians will end up staying in the country and become citizens and what's being done to come up with the right integration policies that will foster acceptance by Germans while also ensuring that Syrians are not isolated in parallel societies?

12 UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal: Syria Regional Refugee Response", www.data.unhcr.org, December 1, 2022.
13 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic", www.reliefweb.int, February 2022.
14 Ibid.
15 World Food Programme, "WFP Lebanon : School Meals Programme", www.reliefweb.int, July 2022.
16 Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Rising Poverty, Hunger Amid Economic Crisis", www.hrw.org, December 12, 2022.
17 Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Hundreds of Refugees Deported to Syria", www.hrw.org, October 24, 2022.
18 Ben Knight, "Germany's Dual Citizenship Reforms 'Way Overdue'", Deutsche Welle, December 5, 2022.
19 Ibid.
20 Reuters, "Number of Syrians Becoming German Citizens Tripled in 2021", www.reuters.com, June 10, 2022.

In the U.S., barely 33,000 Syrians have been resettled or granted asylum since the start of the 2011 raising big questions about equity and fairness in the country's immigration and refugee resettlement system. Compare that with the 100,000 Ukrainians who were admitted just within five months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022[21]. Most of the Syrians that made it to the U.S. have thrived and are already contributing to U.S. society and economy. Some have called the U.S. stance on Syrian refugees a "moral failure."

This paper examines the asylum and integration experiences of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, Germany and the U.S. It highlights the difficulties and challenges they face in their daily lives as well as their contributions to the societies and economies of these countries.

There are glaring disparities in the trajectories of Syrians depending on which country they ended up in underscoring the urgent need for more international coordination in addressing a refugee and displacement crisis that is far from being resolved.

BACKGROUND

About seven million Syrians, roughly one-third of the prewar population, have been forced to leave the country since 2011. The bulk of them, about 5.5 million, are in neighboring states like Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Europe hosts about 1 million Syrian refugees, about 59 percent of them (590,000) are in Germany alone[22].

Immigration is nothing new for Syrians and other people of the Levant, who were once under the Ottoman Empire and then European colonial powers between the two World Wars. One estimate puts the Syrian diaspora pre-2011 – people who had left over decades and centuries – at 18 million scattered over 30 countries[23] (This figure may include immigrants from the wider Levant or what's known as Greater Syria or Bilad al-Cham).

But for sure the outflow of Syrians from their country starting in 2011 represents one of the largest population movements in the Middle East over the past 100 years.

The prospect of Syrians returning home in large numbers anytime soon appears to be nonexistent. The regime from which many people fled remains ensconced in power with the direct support of Russia and Iran amid regional and international acceptance of facts on the ground. In many cases there's nothing to go back to. Entire towns and whole sections of major cities like Aleppo, Daraa, Deir Ez-Zour and Homs have been destroyed by years of regime bombardment and fighting and emptied of their residents as the regime embarks on demographic changes in these places under the guise of urban planning. In addition, swathes of the country in the north, northeast, northwest and east are under the control of local groups backed by outside powers like Turkey, the U.S. and others. Aleppo province alone is divided into zones controlled by the regime, Russia, Iran and its proxy militias and Turkey. A grim economic situation, insecurity, the threat of fresh hostilities, the whims and dictates of the various competing powers and the fact another third of the prewar population remains internally displaced all make the idea of returning from abroad seem like a suicidal mission to many.

So we are looking at the recent Syrian refugees and immigrants likely remaining in place for years, if not decades. According to a World Bank analysis of United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) data[24], there are categories of refugees that remain in exile for anywhere between 10 and 40 years.

Syrian and Iraqi refugees arrive from Turkey to Skala Sykamias, Lesbos island, Greece. Volunteers (life rescue team - with yellow-red clothes) from the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms help the refugees. Wikimedia commons / Ggia

A New Syrian Diaspora

This new Syrian diaspora is hardly monolithic, with their conditions as well as their impact and influence on host countries varying widely. Understanding these disparities and the challenges Syrians face in the countries where they are most concentrated has never been more urgent for a number of reasons:

- The Syrian presence is seen as a crisis and source of political and social friction in many places prompting some governments to initiate hasty repatriation measures that only heighten tensions.

- No political settlement or reconciliation initiative can ever succeed inside Syria without the real and meaningful participation of this new diaspora.

- The dire conditions Syrian refugees face in countries like Lebanon and Turkey are unsustainable and left unaddressed they will likely fuel new crises with wide-ranging repercussions.

- A broad as well as comparative and country-by-country analysis of this new Syrian diaspora is indispensable to flipping the narrative from one of Syrians being seen as a threat and burden to them being regarded as positive contributors to host economies and societies.

- A holistic analysis of this diaspora contributes to a better understanding of the challenges of both integration or return and empowers Syrians in exile to chart their own paths.

- This analysis is indispensable for governments and agencies who want to adopt the right strategies, policies and measures.

21 Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "U.S. Admits 100,000 Ukrainians in 5 Months, Fulfilling Biden Promise", CBS News, July 29, 2022.
22 UNHCR, "Syrian Refugee Crisis-Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus", www.unhcr.org, March 18, 2021.
23 Bassma Kodmani and Hana Jaber, "Mapping the Syrian Diaspora: A Global Player in the Reconstruction of Syria", Arab Reform Initiative, December 5, 2018. https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/mapping-the-syrian-diaspora-a-global-player-in-the-reconstruction-of-syria/
24 Xavier Devictor, "2019 Update: How Long Do Refugees Stay in Exile? To Find Out, Beware of Averages", World Bank Blogs: Development for Peace, December 9, 2019.

Mohammed Saleem, a 50-year-old native of the northern Syrian province of Idlib, and his family. He has worked in farming in Lebanon practically all his life brought his two wives and seven children from Idlib to Lebanon in 2012 when war intensified in Syria. Two more children were born in Lebanon. Of the nine children only one, 10-year-old Ibrahim, attended school, albeit briefly. The eldest of the children is in prison for alleged theft, one teenage girl died in a fire at home and another girl is working as a maid for a Lebanese family.

Four Case Studies

• **Lebanon** – The influx of about 1.5 million Syrians into Lebanon since 2011 has turned this small country of about 4.5 million to the host of the highest number of displaced persons per capita in the world. Lebanon refuses to recognize Syrians as refugees and calls them "temporarily displaced people." In 2015 Lebanon prohibited the UNHCR from registering Syrians as refugees. Despite receiving international aid in the tune of $10 billion since 2011 to alleviate the burden of hosting Syrians, successive Lebanese governments have done everything short of mass deportation to force Syrians back to their country[25]. The result has been total marginalization of Syrians and a compounding of their suffering: Only 16 percent of Syrian refugees above the age of 15 had legal residency in 2021 and 89 precent survived on less than the equivalent of $25 a month per person, according to a UN assessment[26]. Only 47 percent of children aged 6 to 17 attended school[27]. Lebanon's fraught sectarian system, the legacy of the civil war and the Palestinian involvement in it as well as Lebanon's complex and at times painful relationship with Syria have all led the Lebanese state to categorically reject even the thought of integration and assimilation of Syrians who arrived after 2011. The result is that legal rights are basically extended only to those Syrians who are wealthy enough to support themselves as residents or those who can find a Lebanese sponsor for employment in the agriculture, construction and sanitation sectors. The economic collapse and Lebanese citizens' rage at a political class they accuse of corruption, mismanagement, bankrupting the country and responsibility for the Beirut Port explosion in the summer of 2020 all make the situation for Syrians untenable in the medium- and long-term. Politicians continue to blame Syrian refugees for the country's woes in order to deflect the public's anger.

The Lebanese government has spoken about coordinating with the Syrian regime to implement "mass returns" of refugees to Syria. Desperation could drive many Syrians as well as newly impoverished Lebanese to try to reach Europe at any cost.

• **Turkey** – Syria's northern neighbor is home to the largest concentration of Syrians outside the country divided as follows: About 3.6 million have temporary protection status, about 117,000 have legal residency and about 100,000 have been granted citizenship[28].

Only 2 percent live in camps and most are in major urban centers like Istanbul and Gaziantep. While the situation is far better than Lebanon but still apart from those who transferred their wealth and capital to Turkey or were able to start new businesses and find employment in their original professions, it's a precarious existence for most Syrians. At least half of those with temporary protection status are living below the poverty line[29]. Although Turks and Syrians share cultural, historic, familial and religious ties, the language barrier and cumbersome administrative procedures are a major obstacle to accessing state services, schooling and employment. On top of that, deteriorating economic conditions are fueling intense public hostility toward Syrians and other refugees, something being exploited by Turkish opposition parties. President Erdoğan is also intent on instrumentalizing the Syrian refugee presence for his external and internal agendas. Talk of moving Syrians, who are mostly Arab, to border provinces and a "safe haven" within Syria to serve as a bulwark against Kurds has never ceased. Any civil society, political or humanitarian activities by Syrians in Turkey are tightly controlled by authorities and are required to be in harmony with the ruling party's policies and agendas in Syria and the region.

• **Germany** – Summer 2022 marked the seventh anniversary of Germany's decision to allow hundreds of thousands Syrians fleeing the horrors of war into the country. Since then Syrians have made great strides in trying to integrate in their new home. Many have learned the language, pursued higher education, sought employment and financial independence and even made a mark on the country's culture, music and arts scene. A newly arrived Syrian teenage girl became an Olympic swimmer and a 31-year-old lawyer and human rights activist from Damascus who arrived in 2015 ran for a seat in the Bundestag before withdrawing in the face

25 Sam Dagher, "Death By A Thousand Cuts: Syrian Refugees Face Dire Conditions as Lebanon Unravels," Middle East Institute, May 3, 2021. https://www.mei.edu/publications/death-thousand-cuts-syrian-refugees-face-dire-conditions-lebanon-unravels

26 UN Refugee Agency, United Nations World Food Program & the United Nations Children's Fund, "VASyr 2021: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", January 25, 2022.

27 Ibid.

28 International Organization for Migration, "MPM Turkey, Overview of the Situation with Migrants, Migrant Presence Monitoring," Q1 2020. https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/Q1_quarterly-Jan-Feb-Mar-20.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=8300

29 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, "Turkey Country Chapter 2021-2022," February 2021. http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/3RP-Turkey-Country-Chapter-2021-2022_EN-opt.pdf

of death threats and a racist offensive against him. Syrians, with the help of German allies, also managed to bring the first war crimes case against the regime in a German court and secured the first conviction against a former member of Bashar al-Assad's secret police.

2021-2022 was set to be a moment of reckoning for many Syrians in Germany: the largest batch of applications for permanent residency were supposed to take place after a delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was happening as Germans remained deeply divided over the wisdom of having allowed this many Syrians into the country while far-right and hate groups continue to exploit the issue for their political and social agenda. Despite the far better conditions for Syrians in Germany compared with places like Lebanon and Turkey many feel insecure about the future. Will they get permanent residency and citizenship? Will they ever be able to reunite with family members scattered in Europe and the region? Will they be sent to Syria as Denmark planned to do? Germany has so far said it would only deport "potentially-dangerous" refugees but still many fear shifting political winds and public opinion could expand deportation. The other challenges Syrians face in Germany include a generational and socioeconomic divide within the community over tradition, religion and the parameters of integration and assimilation. These are problematic and controversial issues that Syrians themselves must tackle but Germans need to better understand what Syrians are going through.

• **United States** –The U.S. has settled barely 28,000 Syrian refugees since 2011[30].The ascent of Donald Trump to power in 2017 and his ban on immigrants from Syria and other predominantly Muslim countries effectively shut the gate. Even before he took power and especially during the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump and his allies as well as many conservative and far-right media outlets fanned fears of "waves of Syrian immigrants" if Democrats were elected. They fomented hatred and xenophobia toward all immigrants. In the fiscal year ending September 30, 2018 the U.S. admitted just 62 Syrian refugees into the country[31]. Although President Joe Biden has lifted Trump's so-called Muslim ban, it's not clear if and when the U.S. will allow Syrian asylum seekers in any meaningful numbers.

For the most part the Syrians that made it to the U.S. since 2011 have settled into their new home without major issues following the path of millions of immigrants who have come to the country over the decades and centuries in pursuit of the "American dream" – namely working hard and striving to be the "model immigrant" that respects America's rules and values. But it's not only families, like in Germany many of the new arrivals were political activists during the revolution in Syria and have reveled in the new-found freedom to express themselves, criticize U.S. policies and pursue their activism without fear of being killed or imprisoned.

One thing that stands out in the U.S. and you almost do not see it anywhere else is the role of the older Syrian diaspora in supporting the refugees as well as organizing new political and civil society bodies to ease the suffering of those left in Syria and advocate for justice and change in Syria. There are estimates of anywhere between 90,000 to 155,000 Syrian immigrants, who call themselves Syrian-American, concentrated in large metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Detroit[32]. Most of them arrived starting in the 1960s after the U.S. passed the Immigration Act. They are a very small community but include many highly-educated professionals and wealthy individuals who are very active politically on the local, state and federal levels. Organizations like the Syrian American Council, Americans for a Free Syria and the Syria Campaign have played a crucial role in making sure the U.S. keeps the pressure on the Assad regime. They were instrumental in the passage of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act by Congress in 2019. If applied fully they include the strongest sanctions passed against the Assad regime to date because they also target third-country actors doing business with the regime or its fronts and affiliates.

A school for Syrian refugees in Arsal that was closed by Lebanese authorities.

30 Refugee Processing Center, "Refugee Arrivals Fiscal Year by Nationality and Religion Group and Religion October 1, 2009 through September 30, 2022", www.wrapsnet.org.
31 Deborah Amos, "2018 Was a Year of Drastic Cuts to U.S. Refugee Admissions," NPR, December 27, 2018.
32 Basma Alloush, "Syrians in the USA: Solidarity Despite Political Rifts," Arab Reform Initiative, December 5, 2018. https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/syrians-in-the-usa-solidarity-despite-political-rifts/

LEBANON

Photo taken in summer 2021 of Mariam al-Bertawi, who was born in a refugee settlement in Arsal Lebanon. Her parents and siblings had fled their native Qalamoun region in Syria in 2014. The family has been living in a makeshift shelter ever since.

"We are dying here, I have reached a stage where I regret ever having children," said Yasmin, a 28-year-old mother of two and native of Syria's Deir-Ezzour province who has been living in Lebanon since 2013. She spoke while she and four other Syrian women took a break from a long day of pruning, cleaning and collecting thorny branches and other forest debris and stuffing them into a big shredding machine set up in an oak forest within Lebanon's Al-Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve. Yasmin, a dental technician by training in Syria, and the other women each get paid 50,000 Lebanese pounds a day as part of a cash-for-work program funded by international aid agencies. This sum was equal to $2.85 when Yasmin spoke in July 2021. It was $1.20 as of October 2022.

Even though Lebanon has a big need for people like her, Yasmin can't work in her profession because of rules restricting what Syrians can do. Her anguish and desperation is shared by most Syrians who have fled to Lebanon since 2011 and increasingly by many Lebanese too.

"I wish I could just be put in a bag and shipped out of this country," said 30-year-old Omar, a native of the village of Barouk in the Shouf region, who like many other Lebanese in the area have turned to programs like those run by the Cedar Nature Reserve for any meager income. He was working alongside Yasmin and the Syrian women as a pickup driver transporting the shredded forest debris to a facility making compost and briquettes.

For more than two years now, Lebanon has been in the throws of an economic, financial and humanitarian crisis that has been described by the World Bank as among the worst crises globally since the mid-nineteenth century. The country's GDP has been slashed from about $55 billion in 2018 to an estimated $21.8 billion in 2021[33]. The currency has lost more than 95 precent of its value since 2019 and the annual rate of inflation (expected to average 178 percent in 2022) has surpassed that of Venezuela and Zimbabwe[34]. The banking sector has come to a standstill; about $100 billion worth of deposits belonging to Lebanese, Syrians and other foreigners have been frozen and have lost at least two-third of their real value[35].

More than half of the country's own population is likely below the poverty line, beset by drastic electricity blackouts, fuel and medicine shortages and crumbling health and education systems. Add to all of this the social and economic impact of the August 2020 Port of Beirut explosion and the COVID-19 pandemic. An estimated 90 percent of the Syrian refugee population lives below the extreme poverty line[36].

"Before October 2019, 80 percent of our work was with Syrians, now the needs of the Lebanese and Syrians are the same; they're both suffering," said Adham Raydan, who heads procurement and logistics at Basmeh and Zeitooneh, a Lebanon-based NGO supporting Syrian refugees and vulnerable populations since 2012.

"At the moment our projects are divided 50-50 between Lebanese and Syrians and in some instances we have to make it 60 for Lebanese and 40 for Syrians to avoid tension and complaints by Lebanese that we're doing more for Syrians," he added.

It is in these bleak and dire circumstances that nearly 1.5 million Syrians find themselves. For them it's survival day-to-day and hardly about assimilation and integration, which are taboo words for the Lebanese government since the start of the Syrian refugee crisis.

The Syrian presence, which is equal to nearly a quarter of Lebanon's own population, has turned the small Eastern Mediterranean country into the host of the largest number of refugees per capita in the world. The Lebanese government and most Lebanese people have seen this presence as a huge burden, well before the current economic and financial crisis. The reasons are multiple.

33 Yousef Saba and Nadine Awadalla, "World Bank Berates Lebanon's Elite for 'Zombie' Economy", Reuters, January 25, 2022.
34 Fitch Solutions, "Lebanon Set For Second Highest Inflation Rate Globally in 2022", Fitchsolutions.com, August 10, 2022.
35 Timour Azhari, "Distraught Lebanese Depositors Fight For Their Life Savings", Reuters, March 24, 2022.
36 UN Refugee Agency, United Nations World Food Program & the United Nations Children's Fund, "VASyr 2021: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", January 25, 2022.

View of Syrian refugee settlements in Arsal.

After the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon never managed to build adequate infrastructure for basics like electricity, water, roads and sanitation nor strong public and governance institutions. Any real progress remained hostage to internal and regional conflicts and what many Lebanese themselves regard as a dysfunctional political system based on sectarian quotas.

Then there's the fraught relationship between the two neighbors Lebanon and Syria. Syria has never truly recognized Lebanon's sovereignty and independence and only begrudgingly established formal diplomatic ties in 2008. Syria's current Baath regime was a key player in Lebanon's civil war that also involved Palestinian armed factions established in refugee camps, a fact that animates Lebanese fears over the current Syrian presence. Syria's army and security forces were a de facto occupation force in Lebanon from 1976 until 2005 and the start of the uprising and war in Syria in 2011 sharply divided Lebanese society and political forces. Those allied to the Syrian regime mobilized to fight alongside it inside Syria and for a while Lebanese opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad supported anti-regime forces both in Lebanon and Syria. This historic and political context affects almost every aspect of the Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon and so does the fact that for decades Lebanon relied on hundreds of thousands of low-paid Syrian workers in key sectors of the economy like agriculture and construction. One difference now is that seasonal Syrian workers had to bring their wives and children to Lebanon when war broke out in Syria after 2011.

Even though the regime and its allies have regained control of much of Syria, returning home is not a viable option for many Syrians in Lebanon. Many of the conditions for a voluntary, safe and dignified return articulated by the UNHCR in Feb 2018 remain absent. And staying in Lebanon feels like slow death to many Syrian refugees. Trying to move to a third country involves waiting for years for a response from international refugee resettlement programs or taking huge risks and paying large sums of money to try to reach Europe irregularly, and nothing is guaranteed as most human smuggling routes have shut.

"There's no future in Lebanon, no future in Syria and no prospect to immigrate. What will happen next? This is the most difficult question for which there's no answer," said Fouad M. Fouad, a Syrian surgeon by training and an associate professor of Public Health Practice at the American University of Beirut.

In the absence of answers, Syrians in Lebanon face obstacles in every aspect of their existence.

Legal Status

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has steadfastly maintained that Syrians are "temporarily displaced individuals" who must return home. Still the UNHCR was able to register Syrians as refugees for purposes of protection and aid distribution but then the Lebanese government asked the agency to stop doing so in 2015 as the number of fleeing Syrians kept growing amid political and social pressures within Lebanon to stem this flow.

Since then, successive Lebanese governments have tried everything to regulate and reduce the number of Syrians in the country. They required all Syrians to obtain annual residency permits. Those registered with the UNHCR had to prove they entered the country before 2015. Everyone else had to either prove they owned or rented a home and had a steady source of income and bank savings or find a kafeel (a sponsor/guarantor) to get a work permit for a job in strictly three sectors: agriculture, construction and sanitation. Most Syrians in Lebanon are impoverished people who have lost everything in their homeland and therefore can't meet the residency requirements or afford the costs associated with the process, which in the case of the kafeel includes commissions and fees paid to third parties. The result is that in 2021 only 16 percent of Syrian individuals over the age of 15 had legal residency in Lebanon, according to a UN assessment[37].

37 Ibid.

The new requirements also further blurred and confused the lines between who's a refugee and who's a worker able to go back and forth to Syria without a problem as has been the case for years before the conflict. As of the end of September 2022, the UNHCR had about 831,000 Syrians registered as refugees. The Lebanese state says there are another estimated 500,000 to 600,000 Syrians in the country who are a mix of "unregistered refugees" and seasonal and low-skilled workers with or without valid residency permits, bringing the total to about 1.5 million[38].

In further attempts to get Syrians to leave Lebanon, the government coordinated with the Syrian regime what it called "safe and voluntary" returns to Syria—only about 20,000 went back through a program overseen by Lebanon's General Security Directorate since late 2017, a senior officer in the directorate told the report's author. After a pause of almost two years this program resumed in the autumn of 2022 but only a few hundred signed up to return—nowhere near the 15,000 refugees a month that the Lebanese state aimed to return[39].

Many of those that returned through this program or on their own were often arrested and interrogated by the regime or were unable to go back to their original towns and villages which were heavily damaged in the fighting and had become military and security zones. Complicating matters is the fact that the regime wants to tie refugee returns with the lifting of sanctions on it and restoration of diplomatic ties with Western countries. In 2019 the Lebanese government started deporting any Syrian it deemed to have entered the country illegally but then stopped after an outcry by human rights groups and international donors followed by the onset of COVID-19 and the country's multiple crises.

Having no legal status has isolated and marginalized many Syrian communities in Lebanon, pushed them underground, made them live in constant fear and worry and hindered their ability to work, access healthcare and education and register births and marriages. Furthermore, it has deprived them of the most basic protections and exposed them to all forms of exploitation.

Medyan al-Ahmed, a 47-year-old native of the town of Qusair near Homs, is the only one to have legal residency among some 40 people that include his own family and other relatives all living in a collection of tents in a field in the agricultural town of Bar Elias in the Bekaa Valley. They had fled Syria in 2012.

His cousin Mohammed, who lived in a nearby refugee tent settlement, became fed up with the situation in Lebanon and decided to return to Syria in late 2019 after receiving assurances that he would not be harmed by the regime. He was arrested upon his return, held in prison and subjected to severe torture. He was released four months later. He sold all is his belongings in Syria and was smuggled back to Lebanon along with his wife and children. He had forfeited his right to legally reenter Lebanon after his voluntary return to Syria, according to Lebanese rules. Mohammed and his family live in a secret location in Bar Elias because the Lebanese army checks refugee settlements regularly. The prison and torture experience has left the 32-year-old traumatized, suicidal and living in constant fear of anyone in military uniform.

Mohammed Hammoud, a 32-year-old native of the Qalamoun region north of Damascus and defector from the regime's security services, has not ventured outside the Bekaa town of Arsal since 2014 because he has no papers except his Syrian ID. "I go nowhere, my longest trip is to the main town square," he said. The Lebanese army has established checkpoints all around Arsal after it wrested control of the town's perimeter from Nusra Front and Islamic State (ISIS) militants in a joint military offensive with Lebanon's Hezbollah group in 2017[40].

Since then Mr. Hammoud has been living in a tent in Arsal with his wife and 3-year-old son who was born in town but has no official papers except a birth notification issued by a doctor. Only 31 percent of all newborns among Syrian refugees were reported to Lebanon's Foreigners' Registry in 2021, according to a UN assessment[41]. One Lebanese official said that tens of thousands of Syrian children born in Lebanon after 2011 have no official identity documents.

Mr. Hammoud has done odd jobs to survive. He lost a finger working in a falafel restaurant in Arsal and was cheated out of his wages when he worked in construction. He has no legal recourse for compensation because he has worked informally and has no papers. "I am numb, I feel nothing, this is our life," he said. There are thousands of Syrian men in Arsal who are in a similar position.

Agheed, a 26-year-old who was displaced in the summer of 2013 with his parents and three siblings after the regime and Hezbollah launched an offensive to retake Qusair, has also been living in a tent in Arsal since 2014.

He has managed to work informally and enroll in a private university in Zahle, the Bekaa's principal city. His residency permit has expired. The journey to Zahle is usually 90 minutes but it can take him up to four hours sometimes if he's stopped and interrogated at the army checkpoint as happens often. Agheed has decided to save enough money to go to Turkey and then to try his luck to reach Germany or the Netherlands with the help of human traffickers.

"At least outside you feel like a human being, at least in Turkey they give you a piece of paper," he said referring to the temporary protection ID that the Turkish state issues to all Syrians who arrive on its soil and apply for asylum.

A street in Shatila refugee camp, Beirut, Lebanon.

38 The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, "Fact Sheet: Lebanon", September 2022.
39 "Scores of Syrian Refugees Head Home from Crisis-Hit Lebanon", Associated Press, November 5, 2022.
40 France 24, "Syrian, Lebanese Troops Join Hezbollah in Major Ground Offensive", July 21, 2017.
41 UN Refugee Agency, United Nations World Food Program & the United Nations Children's Fund, "VASyr 2021: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", January 25, 2022.

The perfume store opened by Mr. Al-Akraa and his partners in Tripoli, Lebanon. The store was attacked and smashed by local thugs who had been denied perfume for free or at a steep discount.

Work

Starting in 2015 Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR were prohibited from working in Lebanon and if they obtained a work permit they had to relinquish their refugee registration and could only work in agriculture, construction and sanitation. As mentioned previously, obtaining a work permit often requires finding a kafeel who could be the employer or anyone providing this service for money. The worker has to pay upfront fees or relinquish part of their future wages to pay these fees. Haphazard enforcement of labor regulations and the inability of Syrians to obtain work and residency permits has meant that most Syrians work illegally in Lebanon subjected to the system's whims and abusive and exploitative situations.

In the Bekaa Valley, a shawish (camp supervisor) rents land from a Lebanese person to erect tents to rent to Syrian refugees with preference given to large families able to provide labor to work in the agricultural sector. Men, women and children as young as ten are rented out by the shawish to work on land and harvest crops in return for meager daily wages ranging from 20,000 to 50,000 Lebanese Pounds, the equivalent of $0.50 to $1.25.

Basmeh and Zeitooneh, the Lebanese-Syrian NGO, was trying for a while to shift its programs from cash and food handouts to microgrants and training to support entrepreneurship and make refugees more self-reliant and productive. This included people who already had or wanted to acquire skills in fields like catering, hairdressing, tailoring and beekeeping among others but just needed some help getting the right training, buying equipment or renting spaces. Lebanese authorities told the NGO to stop these programs because they were against rules requiring Syrians to obtain work permits for jobs in agriculture, construction and sanitation only.

Shatila Studio, an embroidery and needle art workshop set up by Basmeh and Zeitooneh as a social enterprise which at one point employed about 100 refugee women, had to be turned into a self-sustaining business at the end of 2018. It's struggling to survive at the moment because of the work rules and dire economic conditions.

"Women have a strong desire to work and are innovative but the problem is that there's no room to work the way you want to and in a way that will create value for you and the host country; the system and laws are not designed to promote or support this," said Essa Khedr, a native of the Syrian city of Latakia and project manager at Shatila Studio, located inside Beirut's Shatila refugee camp. Initially set up as a camp for Palestinian refugees in 1949, Shatila is now an overcrowded and dilapidated urban landscape that has seen the influx of about 60,000 Syrians and Palestinian-Syrians since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, according to Basmeh and Zeitooneh.

Some Syrians have tried to work around the rules but with limited success for the most part.

Wael al-Akraa, a 36-year-old native of Homs who fled with his family in 2013 to the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, tried his best to be self-reliant. Starting in 2014 he and other Syrians pooled some savings to open a small perfume store in the old section of Tripoli but it was attacked and smashed by local thugs who had been denied perfume for free or at a steep discount. In 2016 Mr. Al-Akraa and his partners opened household goods stores in Tripoli and in Beirut's Burj Hammoud neighborhood with one of the businesses registered in the name of a Lebanese silent partner to abide by the rules. They were forced to shut their Beirut store shortly after and then their Tripoli store, which was very successful, was eventually raided and closed down by security forces. Mr. Al-Akraa was told he had to get a work permit as either an employee sponsored by a Lebanese person or as a business partner of a Lebanese, which required depositing a large sum of money in a local bank. Mr. Al-Akraa has been trying for almost two years to get a work permit.

"There's no more work in Lebanon and all the laws are stacked against us, we are being told 'go back home, you are not welcome here,'" said Mr. Al-Akraa, who along with several members of his family are wanted by the Syrian regime for organizing and participating in peaceful protests in Homs in 2011-2012. He pulled out his phone to show an old photo of himself with his Syrian friends and partners in Tripoli.

"Out of the nine people you see here, only three remain in Tripoli," he said.

That was the fate of most Syrian professionals, particularly those in the medical and healthcare sectors, who were not allowed to work in their fields and had to leave Lebanon even though there was and still is a huge need for them to serve both the Lebanese and refugee population.

The ones that stayed are working informally to meet the health needs of Syrian refugees doing everything from simple consultations to complex surgeries. They do this work as so-called volunteers with NGOs or by setting up their own informal networks within refugee communities through word-of-mouth or social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. Some work out informal arrangements with Lebanese physicians whereby they are allowed to see Syrian patients in a Lebanese physician's clinic or office in return for sharing patient fees. Sometimes Lebanese authorities turn a blind eye given the immense health needs of the refugee population but Syrian physicians doing this work live in constant fear of being caught and deported as happened on many occasions. One Syrian pulmonary infections specialist was registered as a concierge at one NGO in the Bekaa Valley while treating Syrian patients informally. He was caught and deported. He's now a practicing physician in Canada.

Fouad M. Fouad, the Syrian surgeon and AUB professor, reckons he's probably the only Syrian doctor among those who came to Lebanon after 2011 who is allowed to work legally in Lebanon, albeit in academia. Getting his work permit was no easy feat, taking a few years and intervention by senior officials at the university.

"In 2017 I knew some 100 Syrian physicians who were in Lebanon, today hardly anyone is left," said Dr. Fouad.

The staff of the Bar Elias, Lebanon learning center run by Basmeh and Zeitooneh.

Housing

About 70 percent of Syrians live in residential structures, about 20 percent live in tent settlements and other non-permanent structures and the remaining 10 percent are in non-residential structures like warehouses and shops, according to a preliminary UN assessment of the situation as of late 2021[42].

About 60 percent of Syrian households were living in dangerous, substandard or overcrowded shelters, added the UN[43].

Rents of all shelter types rose by 20 percent in 2021 forcing more families to relocate to cheaper accommodations[44]. For example, in the city of Tripoli Syrian refugee families who could no longer afford apartments were now living in warehouses for less in neighborhoods like Al-Qubbah, according to Rayyan Othman, who heads Basmeh and Zeitooneh's Tripoli operation.

In September 2021, Medyan al-Ahmed, who lived with his family and relatives in a tent settlement in Bar Elias in the Bekaa, was ordered by the landowner to dismantle the tents and move out. For about a month, 40 people, half of whom children between the age of five and 12, camped out in the wilderness awaiting permission from the Bekaa governor to move elsewhere. The permission never came forcing Al-Ahmed to rent an agricultural depot nearby for $1,100 for six months that lacks bathrooms, running water and electricity. He has to burn wood to keep everyone warm amid heavy rain and snowfall in the winter and temperatures that often dip to -10 degrees Celsius.

Lebanon has not allowed Syrians to establish formal refugee camps but informal settlements tied mostly to agricultural work have sprung up over the past decade. Local authorities have largely banned any new settlements resulting in overcrowding and unsanitary conditions at the existing ones. The army and security forces conduct frequent searches and in 2019 they started enforcing a law stipulating that the upper walls and roofs of non-permanent structures must be strictly made out of wood and tarp, exposing refugees to the harsh elements.

Thafer al-Bertawi, who lives in one of those settlements in Arsal with his wife and four children aged three to 15, was forced to demolish the walls of his own shelter to bring them down to five cinder-blocks high, or about 1 meter. Everyone in his settlement of about 280 refugees complied with the order but some in a nearby settlement did not and had their shelters bulldozed by the army.

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.

View of Syrian refugee settlements in Arsal.

The mayor of Arsal Bassel al-Hujairi said the move was an attempt by some in the national government to "pressure Syrian refugees to return to Syria" but that he had argued with officials that it would only serve to "throw thousands of Syrians on the streets" because no one was going to return.

"Staying another decade in Lebanon is a catastrophe; my future and that of my children has been destroyed," said Mr. Al-Bertawi, a defected civil servant wanted by the Syrian regime and now doing work with NGOs active in Arsal and surrounding areas to survive. He yearns to be resettled in a third country.

Zahra Kharma, a Syrian-Palestinian from the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, lost her home and all her belongings in the war and had to flee to Lebanon in 2013. She has been living ever since in a small damp apartment with her son and his wife and their two children in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut.

"In summer humidity and the stench of raw sewage kills us and in winter we freeze. Rats, the size of cats, are running everywhere," said Ms. Kharma during an interview in August 2021. She was coughing and peeling paint was falling off the living room's ceiling and walls.

The influx of new Syrian and Palestinian refugees into Shatila has led to the addition of floors to existing decrepit structures using shoddy materials.

Those outside Shatila and refugee settlements in the Bekaa also face immense challenges made worse by the severe economic crisis convulsing Lebanon.

Suhaila al-Hassan, a native of Homs who has been in Lebanon since 2012, lost her job as an assistant cook when the restaurant she worked in was destroyed in the Beirut Port blast. She lives in a small apartment with her son and daughter in Beirut but she's not sure for how much longer. Her son does only seasonal work and the little cash the family gets from the World Food Program (WFP) is not enough to pay rent which the landlord has vowed to increase because of rampant inflation.

Child education and labor

Lack of access to adequate education for their children is one of the gravest challenges confronting Syrian families in Lebanon. Many children who can't attend school for a myriad of reasons start doing menial and dangerous work at a very early age or are married off in the case of girls creating an entire generation of illiterate, marginalized and exploited Syrians. About one-third of the estimated 660,000 school-age Syrian refugee children have never been to school, according to a UN assessment[45] and more than half of these children have not been enrolled in schools in recent years, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council[46].

Since 2015 Lebanon has received hundreds of millions of dollars from international donors toward the cost of allowing Syrian refugees to enroll in Lebanese public school, usually in second afternoon shifts as is the case with primary education. But confusing rules applied haphazardly on the local level coupled with immense strains on the system due to the severe economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that more and more Syrian refugee children were left out of both remote and in-person learning.

45 Ibid.
46 Norwegian Refugee Council, "The Obstacle Course: Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon", March 2020.

Syrian children are not automatically enrolled in Lebanese public schools and must wait each year for rules and guidance issued by the Education Ministry. Although not required by the ministry for primary education, many schools throughout the country demand valid Syrian government documents, birth certificates and residency permits in order to enroll Syrian children; many Syrian parents can't provide these requirements. Syrian children are also often turned away because schools and classes are at or over capacity. Enrolling in secondary schools and taking national examinations do require legal residency, which the majority of Syrians do not have.

A relative of Thafer al-Bertawi with his baby girl, who was born in Arsal. He never ventures out of Arsal because he does not have documents.

Mohammed Saleem, a 50-year-old native of the northern Syrian province of Idlib who has worked in farming in Lebanon practically all his life brought his two wives and seven children from Idlib to Lebanon in 2012 when war intensified in Syria. Two more children were born in Lebanon. Of the nine children only one, 10-year-old Ibrahim, attended school, albeit briefly. The eldest of the children is in prison for alleged theft, one teenage girl died in a fire at home and another girl is working as a maid for a Lebanese family.

"I want to go to school, I do not want to work, they shout and curse at me at work and one man once sprayed me with water," said Ibrahim, who had to drop out of school and is now working on and off at a bakery in the Chouf Mountain town of Baakline.

Rayyan Othman of Basmeh and Zeitooneh's Tripoli office says the school dropout rate among Syrian children is the worst she's ever seen since the NGO started working in Lebanon in 2012. In Tripoli more children are on the streets begging or selling things at traffic stops or getting caught up in violent situations. Girls as young as 13 are being married off with sometimes nothing more than scribbles on a scrap of cardboard serving as marriage contract, said Ms. Othman.

Ahmed Khellou, a 54-year-old carpenter and native of the northern Syrian city of Afreen who has worked in Lebanon on and off since 1990, had to bring his family over when the situation deteriorated in Syria. He has desperately tried to keep his two daughters and two sons in school. The youngest is in fourth grade but the other three had to drop out because they were denied enrollment in the public secondary school next to their home in the town of Beit Mery near Beirut.

"I told the principal that I was ready to pay fees but he said he could not accept my children and that I should petition the Education Ministry; UNICEF told me they couldn't get involved," said Mr. Khellou.

At the start of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2012, the Lebanese government allowed the main Syrian opposition coalition to open Syrian schools in Lebanon for refugees but then decided to close them. It allowed some informal education programs to continue to be administered by NGOs.

Basmeh and Zeitooneh has established two learning centers in Shatila and Bar Elias for about 3,000 children aged six to 15. The programs which are meant to help children eventually transition to formal education have been a success and were continued during the height of the pandemic as tablets and internet service charge cards were distributed to students. But beyond the pandemic-related disruptions, there are some formidable challenges to maintaining these programs. First, there's the staggering need with waiting lists at both centers in the thousands as well as the funding requirements to keep the programs going. Then there are the limits of these programs within an overall education system that's on the brink. The curriculum of the Basic Literacy and Numeracy program has to be issued and approved by the Education Ministry but this rarely happens on time. The criteria for recognizing the certificates that these informal programs give to students to allow them to move to formal schooling are unclear and keep changing. The ministry also recently discontinued the Accelerated Learning Program that gave children who had been out of school for more than two years the chance to return to education.

"We have been talking about these problems for more than 10 years; I feel the system is effectively treating these children as a burden and rejecting them," said an educator with one of the informal learning programs for Syrian refugee children who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Health

The UNHCR subsidizes Syrian refugees' access to a network of primary healthcare centers and mobile medical clinics run by the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health and partner NGOs. The organization also partially funds access to secondary care mostly provided by private hospitals.

But Syrians still have to make significant out-of-pocket payments for things like consultations, drugs, x-rays, lab tests and all the procedures and services not subsidized by the UNHCR as well as navigate a highly fragmented healthcare system dominated by the private sector.

And now the situation is a lot worse for everyone in Lebanon as the whole healthcare sector crumbles due to the severe economic crisis, shortages of essentials like drugs and fuel to operate hospitals and clinics and a virtual exodus of doctors, specialists and healthcare workers who have seen their salaries become practically worthless.

"For the first time, public hospitals where we refer pregnant women for deliveries are also asking our teams to provide them oxytocin and magnesium, which are essential drugs to treat possibly deadly postpartum conditions," said Médecins Sans Frontières[47].

Many Syrians are forced to rely on a network of informal healthcare professionals within the Syrian refugee population, which also faces significant challenges and limitations of its own. Some Syrians reenter Syria illegally through perilous smuggling routes just to get medical care or have surgeries there and then return to Lebanon also illegally. Syria's healthcare system is no better than Lebanon's but it is cheaper and more accessible to Syrians.

A Lebanon-based Syrian NGO worker who preferred to speak anonymously said an increasing number of Syrian refugees are contacting him for help to find medication or to pay for hospital costs and urgent procedures not covered by the UNHCR. The NGO worker says he reaches out to private Syrian individuals around the world and Syrian medical NGOs operating in the region to try to gather donations to help pay the medical costs of the people who seek his help.

"The situation is getting worse, we are seeing all social safety nets collapsing in front of our eyes," said the NGO worker.

Relations with host communities and security

At first many Syrian refugees felt welcome, particularly in the Bekaa Valley and North regions bordering Syria where there are longstanding historic and familial ties between Lebanese and Syrians. The idea was that this was just a temporary situation and Syrians would be returning home soon.

"When we came to Tripoli in 2013, we rented an apartment but barely bought any furniture. We thought the regime was going to fall and that we would be going back to Syria at any time," recalled Homs native Wael Al-Akraa.

Among the early arrivals in Lebanon were Syrian opposition activists, professionals, entrepreneurs, middle and upper-middle class individuals and others with some means who thought they were just fleeing Syria temporarily. All of them needed to rent homes and apartments and were consuming goods and requiring services in Lebanon, which boosted local communities and the country's overall economy.

Syrian refugees involved in the work-for-cash program run by the Shouf Biosphere Reserve and funded by the WFP, USAID, Germany's development agency GIZ and others.

But as the situation worsened in Syria more refugees fled to Lebanon and other neighboring countries. The initial welcome started to be replaced with hostility fueled by sharp political divisions within Lebanon over the situation in Syria and the spillover of violence from Syria to Lebanon in the form of armed clashes and bomb attacks in several parts of Lebanon. There were also rising concerns among segments of the Lebanese population over the impact of the large Syrian presence on the country's tenuous and fragile sectarian balance; most Syrian refugees are Sunni Muslim.

Most Syrians who could afford to leave Lebanon left to Turkey and other neighboring countries and then onward to Europe or other places. Those that remained have felt increasingly besieged by the rules regarding residency and work, the increased hostility toward them and the fact that they are perceived by authorities as a security threat.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, many municipalities across Lebanon have imposed curfews prohibiting Syrians from venturing outside their homes after certain hours. And several incidents involving Syrian and Lebanese individuals have degenerated into attacks or collective punishment measures against all Syrians.

47 Médecins Sans Frontières, "Healthcare System in Lebanon Disintegrates as Political Vacuum Persists", September 1, 2021.

Syrian refugees involved in the work-for-cash program run by the Shouf Biosphere Reserve and funded by the WFP, USAID, Germany's development agency GIZ and others.

In some instances entire tent settlements were set on fire or all Syrians were targeted and evicted from certain towns and villages because of the actions of one individual.

"We do not feel like human beings here, I think they hate us from the days the Syrian army was in Lebanon," said a 68-year-old native of the city of Areeha in Syria's Idlib province who fled to Lebanon in 2011 with five of his children and several grandchildren. His home in Syria was destroyed and three sons who remained there were imprisoned by the regime.

And since the economic situation began to worsen in Lebanon in late 2019 there's been increased resentment toward Syrians because they are perceived by many Lebanese as taking away work from them by agreeing to lower pay, notwithstanding that the Lebanese have long refused these jobs. There's also the sense among many Lebanese that Syrians get preferential treatment from aid organizations and receive assistance in U.S. dollars which is not the case. Many supermarkets prevent Syrians from buying food products subsidized by the Lebanese government.

Nisreen Salman, a native of the town of Safita in western Syria, joined her husband in Lebanon in 2014. She lost her job in a restaurant after the August 2020 Beirut Port explosion, which also heavily damaged the small apartment that the couple rent in Beirut. Basmeh and Zeitooneh helped them fix the apartment while they and other Syrians in their neighborhood were denied aid by the Lebanese army.

"Lebanese people keep asking me why I am still here and one Lebanese woman at the grocery store cursed at me and told me to go back home," said Ms. Salman.

Syrians opposed to or wanted by the regime feel increasingly vulnerable in Lebanon, where the regime has many allies and loyalists.

In the Bekaa Valley town of Bar Elias, home to about 60,000 Syrians and 40,000 Lebanese, the mayor does not hide his admiration for and allegiance to Bashar al-Assad.

"We told all Syrians you must go vote, this is your president," said mayor Muawas al-Araji, referring to the elections organized by Mr. Assad in May 2021.

Several Syrians interviewed in Bar Elias said they received threatening messages from other Syrians who are known regime loyalists warning them they would be reported to the regime in Damascus and evicted from their tents if they and their families did not go to the Syrian embassy to vote.

"I and other people were threatened face to face; Syrians in Lebanon are afraid of everything and will do anything including vote for a president they detest just to avert trouble," said one Syrian refugee, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The regime trumpeted the turnout in Lebanon as evidence of Assad's popularity while some Lebanese attacked convoys of Syrians heading to the embassy to vote and several anti-regime Lebanese politicians called on those who voted for Assad to return to Syria.

Humanitarian aid

Since 2011 Lebanon has received more than $10 billion to support Syrian refugees and their Lebanese host communities through programs implemented by UN agencies and international NGOs as well as to help Lebanon shore up its infrastructure. This does not take into account funds and assistance that have come through other channels. Yet the whole effort has remained stuck at the emergency phase of intervention with the focus on basic and immediate needs. Any attempt to shift to more sustainable and long-term aid programs that prioritize self-reliance have been blocked by the Lebanese government because of concerns this could be an avenue to integrating Syrians.

Muhanad and Ahmad*, two Syrian refugee boys outside Ahmad's temporary home, in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Wikimedia commons / DFID - UK Department for International Development.

And now even the basics are hard to come by. Overall aid for Syrian refugees in Lebanon has fallen sharply, which has translated into severe cuts in most programs. Whatever cash assistance some refugees still receive is ravaged by inflation and fluctuating and opaque exchange rates. Only a fraction of Syrian refugees, about 230,000, and an equal number of vulnerable Lebanese continue to receive small cash assistance (about $15 per person for up to six family members) from the World Food Program to buy food and other essentials[48]. The program is funded in dollars but recipients have to withdraw the amount in Lebanese pounds from Lebanese bank ATMs.

"We ask people do you want to be trained for two months to become a good hairdresser or would you rather have cash and food rations now, everyone is choosing the latter," said Adham Raydan, Basmeh and Zeitooneh's procurement and logistics head. "It's all about survival now, nobody is looking for stability."

Yasmin, the dental technician who was working with the Cedar Nature Reserve, was let go in September 2021 because the project, which depends on funding from international agencies, ended. It's uncertain if or when there will be another program and whether she'll be selected to rejoin. Her husband Saleh is a stonemason working informally in construction projects but only in spring and summer. He can't find work in winter and neither can Yasmin's 17-year-old sister who also lives with them along with the couple's two children aged eight and four.

As of October 2021 they have been surviving on the 1.5 million Lebanese pounds ($35) they get from the WFP in the form of credit on a card that can only be used toward buying the most basic food items from designated stores. They get some additional food rations from a Dutch NGO. The only reprieve is that the landlord has agreed for the time being not to increase the rent of 500,000 Lebanese pounds ($12) a month and to wait until the spring to be paid. The family uses a firewood stove both for heating and cooking. The children have to wrap themselves with blankets all day when it gets cold.

"We have not had meat, not even a chicken drumstick, since October; I can't even afford a bag of chips for my son because there are other priorities," said Yasmin when contacted again in January 2022.

Yasmin recently sold her gold bracelets just to be able to send her eldest son to a private school in the Shouf Mountain town of Buqata where they live. She had enrolled him three years ago when he turned five in afternoon classes for Syrian refugees at a public school in a nearby village but the economic crisis, lack of resources at the school, frequent strikes by teachers demanding pay raises and the COVID-19 pandemic all meant that her son barely learned anything.

"My son lost three years of his life but I am going to do everything to keep him in the private school where he's making progress," said Yasmin, who like the vast majority of Syrians in Lebanon has applied for resettlement in a third country.

The International Migration Organization (IOM) has resettled more than 100,000 refugees from Lebanon since 2011[49]. Outside this formal system of resettlement, thousands of Syrians, particularly men, have been leaving Lebanon in recent years and heading to countries like Libya and Turkey, from where they have attempted to enter Europe irregularly. Some along with Lebanese and Palestinians have attempted to reach Cyprus irregularly by boat but have been mostly apprehended by the Lebanese Army.

Collaboration and Coexistence

Despite the dire circumstances facing both the Lebanese and refugee population, there are a few good examples of collaboration and coexistence that offer some hope for the future should Lebanon's situation stabilize and should the government reconsider its policies and approaches toward refugees.

• **Arsal community:** The town of Arsal is located about 125 kilometers northeast of the capital Beirut and only 20 kilometers away from the Syrian border. The town and its surroundings are famous for their fruit orchards and rock quarries as well as cross-border smuggling. Families on both sides of the border are related to one another, have the same customs and traditions and speak a similar Levantine Arabic dialect.

48 Miriam Azar, "Syrian Refugees Feel the Heat of Lebanon's Economic Woes", www.WFP.org, January 19, 2022.
49 IOM UN Migration, "Marking a Milestone: 100,000 Refugees Resettled from Lebanon Since Eruption of Syrian Crisis", www.iom.net, June 28, 2019.

The town was a passageway for hundreds of thousands and Syrians who fled the war and at one point was home to about 120,000 Syrian refugees, according to the current mayor Bassel al-Hujairi. The escalating conflict in Syria spilled into Arsal and the town was overrun by ISIS and Nusra Front militants in 2014 but a series of military operations including a joint offensive by the Lebanese Army and Hezbollah restored calm in 2017. But since then the town and its inhabitants, both Lebanese and Syrians, remain stigmatized by Lebanese authorities and the surrounding communities for having been "a haven for terrorists."

At the moment there are about 65,000 Syrians living in Arsal and a native population of 43,000 of whom about 33,000 live fulltime in town, according to Mr. Hujairi. Seventy-five percent of Syrians live in tent settlements. Syrians are allowed to work and they own most shops and businesses in town. Lebanese and Syrians get a long and both have benefited from the influx of NGO aid and funds. The Lebanese are even grateful for the presence of the resourceful Syrians who are good at repairing almost everything. The local economy was thriving before Lebanon plunged into its current crisis.

The mayor Mr. Hujairi says he's serving both Lebanese and Syrians even though the actual voters are only Lebanese. He has gotten involved in everything including helping Syrians detained at Lebanese army checkpoints around town and pleading with the army not to bulldoze temporary settlements.

"Our Syrian brethren need more than one municipality," says Mr. Hujairi jokingly.

He has pleaded with the national government not to impede big projects funded by foreign donors that could provide the town with desperately needed infrastructure and facilities like a new hospital, schools and an entire sewage system. The town was built haphazardly without any urban planning. The mayor says all his ambitions for his town often hit bureaucracy and a certain reticence to do anything while Syrians are present. He says authorities seem to forget that all the infrastructure will stay even if every single refugee returns to Syria.

• **Basmeh and Zeitooneh:** The NGO whose name means "a smile and an olive" in Arabic was launched by Syrians to help other Syrians with a focus on gaps left by big aid agencies and on the most marginalized and poorly served communities in the suburbs of Beirut, certain neighborhoods of Tripoli and parts of the Bekaa Valley. The organization's programs have sought to empower refugees and foster cohesion between them and host communities. For instance, shelter renovation projects try their best to source materials and labor from within the targeted communities. The NGO has partnered with a diverse set of donors from philanthropists like Chris Larsen and Lyna Lam and charities like Caritas to government bodies like Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Basmeh and Zeitooneh is one of few Syrian NGOs registered and allowed to work in Lebanon. It has a team of about 500 staff members and volunteers including Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians working together at every level. And as the situation has worsened in Lebanon it's programs have broadened to cover all vulnerable groups.

In the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut explosion the NGO raised $3 million to fix homes and businesses, distribute cash and food rations and provide psychological support to everyone who was affected regardless of their nationality, according to co-founder Fadi Haliso, an Aleppo native. Syrians and Lebanese worked side to side to clean the debris from homes and help victims.

"I am happy to see the seeds we planted bearing fruit, I love this country and if this was another country (meaning if the laws permitted) I would have become a citizen by now," says Mr. Haliso.

He's particularly proud of the Lebanese youth at Basmeh and Zeitooneh who have been driven by a desire to contribute and make a difference. But he does concede that keeping everyone including himself hopeful and motivated in the midst of the current circumstances is an immense challenge. Almost every program is impacted by the bleak economic realities and rigid rules that stifle any attempt to build anything durable and sustainable.

All efforts to focus on vocational training and self-reliance have been cast aside as people want cash and food in hand. Teachers and volunteers do everything to protect vulnerable children and provide them with education only to see those efforts squandered when kids can't transition to formal education. Even the effort to distribute aid equitably and safely is now under threat.

"Every time we go out to distribute aid, I have to ask for an army patrol to accompany us and I constantly worry about someone angry over not receiving aid barging in to threaten or harm our staff," says Rayyan Othman, head of the Tripoli operation.

Shatila Studio, an embroidery and needle art workshop set up by Basmeh and Zeitooneh as a social enterprise which at one point employed about 100 refugee women, had to be turned into a self-sustaining business at the end of 2018. It's struggling to survive at the moment because of the work rules and dire economic conditions.

• **Shouf Biospehere Reserve:** The reserve, the largest and most unique of its kind in Lebanon, was established in 1996 and encompasses an area of about 50,000 hectares is about 5 percent of Lebanon's total surface, containing cedar forests with trees as old as 2000 years ringed by oak and juniper forests. There are 24 villages surrounding the biosphere which extends from the Chouf Mountains to the Bekaa Valley.

The management of the biosphere has worked with international agencies and foreign governments to preserve this heritage while also enhancing the well-being and income of the inhabitants. Like everywhere in Lebanon, the area saw a large influx of Syrian refugees.

Many of them have been included in projects and programs funded by the likes of the WFP, USAID and Germany's development agency GIZ whereby they do work in the biosphere in return for cash. The work is mostly related to forest management and maintenance to prevent fires, clearing roads and trails and fixing and building retaining walls to prevent erosion.

The Shouf Biosphere Reserve's Kamal Abou Assi, who is in charge of the cash-for-work projects, says a comprehensive vulnerability assessment is conducted for everyone who's integrated into the programs and that the goal is to try to get as many people as possible to benefit by limiting the number of days any one individual can work.

The biosphere and its projects have not been immune from the crisis ravaging Lebanon. More Lebanese are out of work now and they too are in need of these cash-for-work programs. One of the participants was a Lebanese man from one of the biosphere villages who lost his job as a bank auditor in Beirut.

Local farmers complain that they can't get Syrian workers because the biosphere pays them 50,000 a day instead of the 35,000 that the farmers are willing to offer. Syrians complain that the 50,000 is nothing and keep asking for a raise. Lebanese villagers complain that Syrians are benefiting more from these programs or that these NGO-funded programs are meant to ultimately "turn Syrian refugees into citizens of Lebanon," a sentiment echoed by many Lebanese government officials.

"I have to keep explaining to the local mayors and communities that these projects benefit everyone," says Nizar Hani, the biosphere's manger. "The work that the Syrians do on the land, forests and roads is contributing to the public good."

Syrian refugees involved in the work-for-cash program run by the Shouf Biosphere Reserve and funded by the WFP, USAID, Germany's development agency GIZ and others.

Mr. Hani says there are many people among the Syrian refugee population who are skilled agricultural engineers and forest managers but he can't hire them because of Lebanon's labor laws. He believes the cash-for-work programs are a good interim solution and should be expanded, elevated to include more skilled workers and applied to other sectors like healthcare and infrastructure.

"The government needs to be more proactive," says Hani.

TURKEY

Maher was 17 when he escaped to Turkey from the province of Raqqa after the Islamic State declared its so-called caliphate in 2014 and started consolidating control over large parts of Iraq and Syria. His first stop was the Turkish border town of Reyhanli and then he made his way to the coastal city of Mersin, where he knew other Syrians from Raqqa who had fled there before him.

Maher had no papers and worked illegally in a factory to support himself and send some money back to his family in Syria who also had to flee Raqqa and seek refuge in a safer part of northeast Syria. He was working 12-hour days and making about 250 Turkish Liras a week, or the equivalent of $100 at the time—half of what's normally paid to Turkish citizens doing the same job.

Later, Maher registered with the authorities to get a temporary protection ID card (Kimlik), taught himself Turkish and studied part-time and obtained a high school degree from a school run by the Syrian opposition. He was accepted at an institute in Mersin to study computer science but he missed enrollment because he was working long hours. He later managed to get a 9-month scholarship to study at a university in Malatya, 480 kilometers east of Mersin. He could not afford to live on the modest stipend that came with his scholarship and could not find part-time work in Malatya. So he dropped out and returned to Mersin where he's working in a facility sorting and packaging second-hand clothing. He can barely survive on his meager wages as the Turkish Lira lost about 45 precent of its value in 2021 and another 29 percent in 2022[50] and inflation soared to rates not seen in nearly two decades.

50 Kerim Karakaya, "Turkey Orders Banks to Limit Foreign Currency Holdings", Bloomberg, December 10, 2022.

Scenes in Istanbul's Başakşehir district. Many Syrian families who have some means and are conservative in their lifestyle are attracted to Başakşehir, where gated communities with Islamic character have been growing since Islamists have started gaining political power in Turkey in the mid 1990s.

"I have been here for seven years and I have nothing; I am running day and night for nothing and at the end of the month I owe people money," said Maher, who had turned 24 when he spoke in the fall of 2021.

On top of this precarious existence, Maher and most Syrians in Turkey have to contend with unprecedented levels of hatred and racism toward them as they are blamed by many Turks for the worsening economic conditions and accused of taking their jobs and receiving aid from the state.

"I tell them how can I be taking money from the state when I have to work 12-hour days and I am being exploited and getting paid less than you," said Maher.

His youngest brother fled Syria and joined him in Turkey in September 2021 by paying a smuggler about $1000 since the Turkish government officially sealed its borders with Syria at the end 2015. Both Maher and his brother are now trying to reach Germany or any other European country by any means.

The story of Maher and his brother is that of many among the estimated 3.6 million Syrians now living in Turkey since the start of the crisis in Syria in 2011. The number could be higher given that some Syrians in Turkey have no legal status whatsoever and the fact Syrians continue to enter the country illegally despite the border restrictions, fleeing dire circumstances inside Syria and other countries in the Middle East like Lebanon.

Turkey has done a good job in making sure that Syrian refugees are accorded the basics like healthcare, shelter and education and has allowed them to work, own businesses and study in universities but has given little thought to what happens if Syrians stay for another 10-20 years or indefinitely.

"Most Turks think Syrians will go back and this is what politicians keep saying; nobody talks about them staying and what we can do to make their lives better and how we can coexist, we never hear that," said Fayeza Gümüşlüoğlu, a Turkish foreign affairs journalist and broadcaster based in Istanbul.

The future of Syrians in the country is now intricately tied to the political landscape within Turkey, more precisely the results of the 2023 general election. The future also depends on Turkey's own position and posture inside Syria as one of the key players in the conflict since 2011 and its current commitments to Europe in ensuring there's not a repeat of the refugee crisis of 2015-2016.

Origins of Syrian Influx

From the very start Turkey has served as the primary destination for those fleeing the conflict in Syria, particularly from the northern half of the country. Syrians did not need a visa to enter Turkey. Under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey sided with protesters and then supported forces trying to overthrow the Assad regime. Towns and cities along both sides of the 911-kilometer (566 miles) border served as hubs for the military and political opposition effort as well as the humanitarian, medical and logistical aid needed to sustain areas that had slipped from regime control. The deliberate and relentless bombardment of these opposition areas by the regime drove more and more Syrians into Turkey. At one point in 2012 Turkey argued for the creation and enforcement of a no-fly-zone in northern Syria that would also serve as a safe haven for civilians fleeing the regime's aerial bombardment, but the idea was rejected by the U.S.

As the numbers kept increasing Turkey built camps on the Turkish side of the border. Everyone inside or outside the camps and regardless of whether they had entered Turkey legally or illegally were given temporary protection. This status is supposed to protect against forcible return to Syria and allow access to health, education, the labor market and social assistance until a more permanent solution is found.

The dynamics of the conflict in Syria began to change in 2014-2015 with the expansion of ISIS and the emergence of Western-backed Kurdish militias as a counterforce. Violence linked to Syria started spilling into Turkey itself. The Turkish government was under pressure both domestically and internationally to control its land borders.

Turkey started sealing the border at the end of 2015 and launched plans to build a security wall along the frontier with Syria. But operations by the Syrian regime and its allies Russia and Iran to retake Aleppo and Idlib provinces in the north as well as the intensifying Western-led operations against ISIS in the northeast and east triggered another large wave of Syrians fleeing to Turkey mostly illegally and with the help of smugglers. Some of those intercepted by Turkish border guards were turned back to Syria, others were wounded or killed trying to cross the border. The decision by Turkey in 2018 to shut down Syrian refugee camps along the border also forced many Syrians to head to towns and cities in the Turkish interior.

Legal Status

In an attempt to control the large number of Syrians who entered the country with the help of smugglers, Turkey began requiring in early 2016 pre-registration with the country's Foreigners' Police as a prelude to registering for temporary protection and receiving an official ID card, or Kimlik. In tandem, the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) launched an effort to verify all Syrians present in Turkey under temporary protection and required everyone to get a newly designed Kimlik free of charge. The Kimlik must be obtained from provincial DGMM offices and rules and procedures vary from place to place. There are significant delays in securing temporary protection and ID cards in large cities like Istanbul and Izmir. Once they get their Kimlik Syrians are required to remain in the province where it was issued and apply for a permission from the local DGMM office each time they want to travel outside the province. They can apply for this permission online but most times it's rejected.

Syrians found ways to get around the restrictions and the backlog in new Kimlik applications particularly in major cities like Istanbul. A network of Syrian taxi drivers connected mainly through WhatsApp mushroomed all over Turkey to help those denied travel permission to move around the country. And Syrians with some financial means started paying brokers to obtain expedited Kimliks with less hassles in the province of their choosing.

In late 2017 and 2018 Turkey stopped registering Syrians for temporary protection in Istanbul and nine provinces at or near the Syrian border in an attempt to discourage people from paying smugglers to come to Turkey.

In 2019 and in response to public pressure around the time of local elections, authorities began detaining Syrians without a valid Kimlik or with a Kimlik from a province different from where they were living and deporting them to Syria. This happened in major cities like Ankara and Istanbul. There was a hiatus in applying these rules around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic but many Syrians still fear deportation for violating Kimlik rules or for any other reason. Deportations appear to have resumed again in 2022 particularly in Istanbul. Within two days at the end of January about 150 Syrians, many of them university students, were detained in Istanbul mostly for Kimlik-related issues and deported to the northern Syrian town of Azaz[51].

As of January 2022, Turkey had 3.733 million Syrians registered under temporary protection, according to DGMM statistics. The largest concentration of Syrians is in Istanbul, about 600,000.

The other option Syrians have for staying in Turkey is relinquishing temporary protection in favor of a short-term residency tied to visit and tourism visas or a long-term one linked to work or study. All require valid Syrian documents including passports which must be obtained and renewed every year at the Syrian consulate in Istanbul at exorbitant rates that reach $2,000 per passport for each family member (these funds flow to the Syrian regime which is allowed to maintain consular services in Turkey). Getting a visa requires leaving Turkey, applying from a third country and reentering by air. As of January 2022, only about 105,000 Syrians had a valid residency permit in Turkey.

Since 2011, Turkey has granted citizenship to about 110,000 Syrians. They are mostly university students, certain professionals and those with the means to invest in the country, buy property and deposit large sums of money in local banks. Many Syrians complain that the citizenship process is highly selective, cumbersome and long and lacks transparency and consistency when it comes to the criteria.

Yehya, a 30-year-old native of Idlib and former police officer, was imprisoned by the regime for nearly two years on suspicion that he and 12 other officers were planning to defect. While in prison, three of his brothers, a cousin and a nephew who were all working in Lebanon at the time were abducted at a regime checkpoint in Damascus when they returned to Syria in 2012 to visit their families during a holiday. They have been missing and presumed dead ever since.

Yehya was released from a prison near Damascus and made his way to a part of Idlib that was under opposition control. He could not live there and left for Turkey in 2013. He arrived in the border province of Hatay and then made his way to Istanbul but could not find work there except in trash collection. He then went to Adana in the south where he was able to get an Adana issued Kimlik. He worked for a while in construction but then could not find additional work in Adana and decided to return to Hatay, which is now home to about 450,000 Syrians—the third largest concentration after Istanbul and Gaziantep[52].

Students and staff at the Karam House in Reyhanli. In 2016 Lina Sergie-Attar, a Syrian American architect and writer, established the first Karam House in Reyhanli, a Turkish town close to the Syrian border that became the first stop for most fleeing Syrians.

51 Sultan al-Kanj, "Turkey Forcibly Deports Dozens of Syrians", Al-Monitor, February 8, 2022.
52 UNHCR Turkey, "Provincial Breakdown Syrian Refugees in Turkey", www.data.unhcr.org , February 2022.

Yehya was unable to obtain a new Kimlik in Hatay but still was hired by local contractors illegally to work on high-profile renovation projects like a landmark mosque and the municipal building in the provincial capital Antakya. His cousin and several of his friends were not as lucky and were caught by police and deported to Syria for not having a valid Hatay Kimlik.

Yehya has tried on three occasions—in 2017, 2018 and 2019—to reach Europe with the help of smugglers that are paid about $1,700 just to get him to Greece. He was caught all three times by Greek police and returned to Turkey. He's saving enough money to try for a fourth time. His sister and her husband and children were among the Syrians who reached Germany in 2015. They are now living in the city of Leipzig.

"Eight years and I have nothing but a Kimlik, I am a nobody; they can toss me back in Syria any time," said Yehya.

One Turkey-based Syrian NGO director said the precarity of the legal status associated with temporary protection is "the most terrifying thing" for most Syrians in Turkey.

"I am not a refugee and I can't apply for resettlement via the UNHCR, we are practically invisible to the international system; Turkey could pass a law any time ending this temporary protection," he said on condition of anonymity.

Turkey is a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention but only those originating from Europe are accorded refugee status. In 2013 it passed a law establishing a system of "international protection" for non-European asylum seekers. A subsequent 2014 government regulation formalized the temporary protection status and the rights and benefits that go along with it, but all of this could be terminated at any time by the government.

Language and Education

Lack of adequate knowledge of the Turkish language remains one of the main obstacles for many Syrian adults in Turkey. Several Turkish state-funded institutions as well as foreign and local NGOs do provide language courses and certification for free but most Syrians find it hard to study and work fulltime at the same time. The number one preoccupation of most Syrians is to work and provide for their families. Complicating efforts to learn the language is the fact that many Syrians often only mix with other Syrians at work and in the neighborhoods where they live. Language is even a bigger barrier for those women who do not work and have to stay home to take care of their families.

Friday prayers in Istanbul's working class district of Esenyurt, which is popular with Syrian refugees of modest means. The area has witnessed frequent attacks on Syrian refugees.

The situation is different for Syrian children and young adults who are integrating in Turkish schools and universities in greater numbers.

When Syrians first fled to Turkey they thought their stay would be temporary so the government allowed children to attend schools (more like temporary learning centers) set up by the Syrian opposition and NGOs that were teaching a modified Syrian curriculum in Arabic. But starting in 2017 the Turkish government decided to phase out these special schools and transfer Syrian children to the Turkish public education system over a period of 3 years. With funding from the European Union, the Turkish government provided cash assistance to those Syrian families sending their children to Turkish schools. As of 2019-2020, there were about 685,000 Syrian children enrolled in schools in Turkey, representing about 60 percent of all school-aged Syrian children, according to the UNHCR. But more than 400,000 school-aged refugee children were still out of school, according to the UNICEF[53]. Only 7,000 were enrolled in the Accelerated Learning Program to get them back to school. To accommodate more Syrian children, Turkey is building 129 new schools with EU funding and another 55 with World Bank funding.

At first the transition to Turkish schools was difficult for many Syrian children but with time most adapted and even thrived. In many families, the children are often the only ones fluent in Turkish which puts a burden on some of them to accompany their parents to government offices, hospitals and banks in order to translate for them. The transfer to the Turkish education system has also raised questions about identity and what happens if the temporary protection that Syrians have ends and they have to leave Turkey, either to a third country or back to Syria.

"We have a huge identity crisis, the children are thoroughly immersed in Turkish culture at school and are raised to love Ataturk but at home the parents insist on speaking Arabic and preserving Syrian identity and traditions," said Issam Khatib, executive director the Syrian civil society NGO Kesh Malek, who recently moved to France with his wife and 9-year-old daughter Zahr after eight years in Turkey.

"And at the end of the day the children are not Turks because the vast majority of Syrians are technically just guests of the Turkish state and could be asked to leave any time."

In the Turkish border town of Reyhanli, which is part of Hatay province and where Syrians now number more than 150,000 and Turks are at about 100,000, a group of Syrian high school students recount the bullying, racism and even violence they had to contend with when they first moved to Turkish public schools a few years ago.

"We still get into fights with Turks at school but our parents keep telling us to avoid problems and stay grateful because we can be deported if we get into trouble," said one student.

53 UNICEF Turkey, "Humanitarian Situation Report No. 40", January 2021.

Still many are happy they moved to Turkish schools because in a way it broadened their horizons and presented them with new opportunities in life. Almost all the temporary Syrian schools that were established in Reyhanli at the start of the Syrian influx to Turkey were Islamic in character with separation of boys and girls, strict enforcement of Islamic dress code for girls and a heavy focus on Islamic education.

Mohamed, who turned 17 in 2021, was 10 when his family fled Hama province and settled in Reyhanli. His parents enrolled him in one of these Syrian schools. He recalls how some of his friends had to drop out to work in construction or agriculture to help support their families. They never returned to school. He continued his education and transferred to a Turkish school, where he excelled. He's finishing high school and hoping to get a scholarship to study in the U.S..

"I tell my parents I want to study psychology but they think that's silly," he says with a smile.

His friend Sidra says she's the only one among her siblings to have embraced Turkish language and culture when they moved to Turkish schools. She has more Turkish friends now and is often teased by other Syrians because of that.

"They ask me why I hang out with Turks and tell me that I am 'unpatriotic'," says Sidra.

Both Sidra and Mohamed are part of a cohort of 285 Syrian students being mentored and supported by the non-profit Karam Foundation through innovative programs and workshops held at two Karam House locations in Reyhanli and Istanbul. The initiative aims to instill leadership qualities and skills in children and help them navigate and overcome the challenges they face in Turkey as refugees, discover themselves and their abilities and chart their own career paths. The need for such initiatives is huge but they remain inaccessible to many Syrian children given the sheer size of the refugee population and the fact that it's spread out all over Turkey.

Yusuf, who turned 16 in 2021, was 10 when his family fled to Turkey from the city of Palmyra in Homs province. They settled in the city of Gaziantep, which is now home to more than half a million Syrians and is the second largest concentration after Istanbul. He attended a temporary Syrian school for two years and then transferred to grade 8 in a Turkish school. He excelled in his academics and was in the soccer team but was told he could only attend a vocational high school (meslek) even though his scores more than qualified him to go to a general high school, which gives him a lot more university options.

When Yusuf complained to the school principal he was told: "This is all we can offer you, if you want stay and if you don't leave."

Yusuf was already getting frustrated and disillusioned with school where he's bullied and harassed by Turkish students and told to go back to Syria and "stop living off state handouts paid for by Turkish taxpayers." He is thinking of quitting and working fulltime in his father's grocery store.

Since 2013-2014, Syrians under temporary protection have been allowed to attend Turkish state universities for free or for symbolic tuition. About 50 of 129 state universities have abided by a government guidance concerning this. This coupled with scholarships provided by Turkish and international institutions and foreign governments has helped increase the number of Syrians pursuing higher education every year, reaching about 40,000 in 2021.

But starting in 2021-2022, Syrians will have to pay tuition like any foreigner in Turkey. The decision comes amid an intensive public campaign against Syrian refugees led by opposition politicians and which claims among other things that Syrians are favored over Turks in state universities.

Rana, a 21-year-old native of the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzour, is studying civil engineering at Harran University in Şanliurfa in southeast Turkey—home to more than 400,000 Syrians mostly from Deir Ezzour and Raqqa. Her tuition and that of other Syrians was being paid by a Kuwaiti organization but this was stopped. Even if she eventually gets her degree Rana is not sure she'll find work in her field. Her application for citizenship which was sponsored by the university was rejected but no reason was provided.

"We are grappling with a miserable present and unknown future, our generation is lost; all my friends who got degrees in Turkey could not work in their fields, it's really demoralizing," said Rana.

Yusuf and his family fled from Palmyra to Turkey when he was 10 years old. They settled in Gaziantep, which is now home to more than half a million Syrians and is the second largest concentration after Istanbul.

Health

Syrians with temporary protection registration have access to free primary, secondary and some tertiary healthcare services at public facilities. Access is a problem for those registered in one province but are living and working in another. Language and an overburdened public health system are also obstacles for many Syrians.

"A stranger has to be well-behaved, we're the ones who should accommodate them and assimilate with them," said Mr. al-Nahas, who is 57. "I'll never go to Europe, it's enough that I am in an Islamic country and I hear the call to prayers five times a day."

In an attempt to address these problems, the Turkish government allowed some Syrian doctors to work at refugee polyclinics like the nine opened in the city of Gaziantep but they are only allowed to be general practitioners and prescribe only certain medicines and administer vaccines. Syrian doctors have no right to refer patients to hospitals or perform surgeries.

There were some early exemptions like at a hospital in Reyhanli that was funded by the Qatari government where some Syrian doctors and visiting medical teams were allowed to perform surgeries but this did not last long.

Some Syrian medical NGOs are allowed to operate in Turkey but they can only provide physiotherapy and psychological support services.

"There is a huge bureaucracy and Turkish doctors often prioritize Turkish patients over Syrians," said on Syrian doctor working with one of these medical NGOs who spoke on condition of anonymity.

A 24-year-old Syrian said he once had a serious accident in Istanbul but his temporary protection ID (Kimlik) was issued by another province. He said the only way he could get into the emergency unit at a government hospital was borrowing the Kimlik of a friend and pretending to be him.

Even those with valid Kimliks recounted countless ordeals of getting adequate care when Turkish medical staff found out they were Syrians.

"My sister fell and broke her leg and she had a cast but when we went back to the hospital to remove it they kept shouting at us and telling us 'you Syrians beat your children,'" recalled an 18-year-old Syrian who speaks Turkish and lives in Istanbul with valid registration. "We had to make several trips to the hospital and beg them to remove the cast."

Work

In early 2016 Turkey started allowing Syrians under temporary protection to apply for work permits but they could only do so in provinces where they had been registered for at least six months and they must be sponsored and given a contract by their employer. Syrians can't make up more than 10 percent of a company's workforce.

Few employers are willing to pay the expenses associated with hiring Syrians legally resulting in a situation where the vast majority of them are working illegally with no rights and protections and for much less than what Turks are paid. Most work in factories and workshops that produce goods for export, essentially providing exporters with very cheap labor and boosting their competitive edge.

Syrians in Turkey have a saying to describe this situation: "Living from bed to factory"

In the industrial zone between Gaziantep and Şanliurfa, which collectively are home to nearly one million Syrians, there are Syrians working in factories from 4 am until 8 pm on dangerous machines for a salary of 2,500 liras a month, less than what a Turkish army conscript gets paid, according to two Syrians who did these jobs for a while.

One of them briefly secured a work permit through a government employment agency called Işkur. He worked in a supermarket chain but was paid a pittance after all the deductions linked to his short-term employment contract and described work conditions as "brutal."

And it's not only low-wage workers who are having a hard time as inflation ravages Turkey's economy. Annual inflation hit a 24-year high of 85.5 percent in October 2022[54].

A Syrian, who speaks Turkish perfectly and holds a degree in software programming from a university in Izmir, can't find work in her field and is working as a translator for a Turkish company in Istanbul that does business in the Arab world. She's paid less than her Turkish colleagues and is treated poorly. She's afraid to lose the job if she asks for a raise. She's applying for work elsewhere but keeps getting rejected which she suspects is related to her being Syrian. She holds Turkish citizenship.

54 Reuters, "Turkey's Inflation Hits 24-year High of 85.5% After Rate Cuts", www.reuters.com , November 3, 2022

Syrian fast food restaurants now dominate Istanbul's Fatih district, another area very popular with Syrians and other immigrants and refugees that have flocked to the city in recent years.

Tens of thousands of Syrian physicians, pharmacists, engineers in all fields and other professionals were among those that fled to Turkey. Very few were able to continue working in their professions despite the great need, particularly in medicine, because of restrictions imposed by the government and Turkish professional associations. Many left to third countries, mostly in Europe. The few physicians that remained are working mainly with NGOs based in Turkey but mostly catering to the needs of Syrians in areas across the border in Idlib and Aleppo provinces. These medical NGOs are only allowed to provide physiotherapy and psychological support services to Syrians inside Turkey. Many of these Syrian doctors are often working without permits because of the complications and difficulties in obtaining them.

On a morning in September 2021, a group of Syrian doctors at one medical NGO in Gaziantep had to literally escape from their offices after they were tipped off about a police raid to check on work permits.

"Our whole life in Turkey is in a gray zone," said one of the doctors bitterly.

"This gray zone is killing us and after all these years and in the current climate of scapegoating Syrians for Turkey's problems it is becoming alarming."

Areej al-Khalidi, a native of Deir Ezzour and a teacher by profession, escaped to Turkey in 2015 with her husband and their five children after he was freed from a notorious regime prison in Palmyra. They settled in Şanliurfa and she worked as a teacher's assistant in a Turkish school helping Syrian students transition from special schools and urging Syrian parents to send their children to Turkish schools. Ms. Khalidi became the principal's assistant, in effect "the Syrian principal." Her contract and that of almost 13,000 other Syrian teachers like her were terminated in June 2021 without explanation.

"We accepted the low wages but then all of a sudden they stopped the contracts, there's nobody to represent us or tell us why this happened," said Ms. Khalidi.

Despite all the challenges facing Syrians in Turkey's labor market, they have nonetheless excelled as entrepreneurs and business owners. Their participation has injected dynamism and growth into local economies and revitalized whole districts of Istanbul and in some cases entire towns and cities like Gaziantep, which was a provincial backwater before the arrival of nearly half a million Syrians.

Syrians are involved in sectors like manufacturing, retail, telecommunications, tourism, food and restaurants and even the hair transplant business, which attracts hundreds of thousands to Turkey each year and is worth over $1 billion[55].

And these Syrians range from industrialists and manufacturers from Aleppo who relocated to cities like Gaziantep and Mersin where they made big investments to sweet makers and restauranteurs from Damascus who started out with stands in Istanbul's Fatih district and now have outlets all over the city.

Not far from Gaziantep's Çarşi, or bazaar, Damascene Nour Jazmati, who was once imprisoned by the regime for her political views, and her husband Abdel-Baset Deebo, a native of Aleppo, run Noontech. They started out as a small mobile shop in the bazaar and grew the business, acquired a Turkish company and became a major retailer and wholesaler of laptops, printers, mobile phones, security cameras and tech accessories. Their clients include Turkish companies, hospitals and the Gaziantep municipality. They have sales of over $7 million and plan to open eight retail shops all over Turkey and branch out into e-commerce.

The couple have two girls who were born in Turkey. They all became Turkish citizens in 2021 after a 4-year application process. Ms. Jazmati says even though the business is fully legal and pays taxes to the Turkish state, she is often greeted with suspicion and spite at Turkish banks and some government offices. She does not let this deter her.

"We have created a good model for what Syrians can accomplish if given a chance," says Ms. Jazmati.

Housing and Living Conditions

Almost 98 percent of Syrians in Turkey live in homes, apartments and other dwellings rented from Turks and located in neighborhoods with Turks[56], yet most Syrians say there's little or no interaction between them and their Turkish neighbors. Syrians say they are often ignored or snubbed by Turks.

Mohamed Nour al-Faqir is a Damascene opposition activist who came to Turkey in 2014 after two years of imprisonment and torture by the Syrian regime. He works at a think tank with Syrians but lives in a building with only Turks in Beylikdüzü, a well-to-do modern district on the European side of Istanbul, which in recent years has become popular with Arabs. He has made several kind gestures and overtures to his Turkish neighbors but to no avail.

"In Damascus we say feed the mouth, you shame the eye but these tactics do not work with Turks, who are very strict and almost warrior-like," says Mr. al-Faqir with a smile.

Syrians have different customs like for instance congregating on balconies or in front of their homes when the weather is warm. This annoys many Turks who complain about the noise or simply the sound of people speaking a language they do not understand. One Syrian man said his neighbor once called the police because she was bothered by the bundles of garlic bulbs hanging on his balcony.

"We insist on saying good morning every day and they insist on not responding to us every day," said Areej al-Khalidi, the Şanliurfa-based teacher about her Turkish neighbors, who often slam the door when they come across her and her children and husband going up the stairs of the apartment building where they live.

55 Angus Bennett and David Rovella, "Why men Everywhere are going to Istanbul for Hair Transplants", Bloomberg, September 27, 2021.
56 World Bank Group, "10 Years On, Turkey Continues its Support for an Ever-Growing Number of Syrian Refugees", www.worldbank.org, June 22, 2021.

Ms. Khalidi's husband Ahmed who runs a civil society NGO in which she's also involved says Turks particularly in Şanliurfa were welcoming and generous when Syrians first started fleeing to Turkey in 2012. But this welcome faded the more Syrians arrived and the longer they stayed. Mr. Khalidi said it was not uncommon for a Syrian to pay 1,000 liras a month in rent for an apartment in Şanliurfa for which a Turk only pays 300 liras and for the Syrian to still be treated with hostility.

Relatives of the Khalidis, a 6-member family who became Turkish citizens recently and who worked, studied and thought of themselves as "model Syrians," were evicted by their landlady at 4 am because she decided she wanted the house. One of the daughters was getting ready to go to the hospital to give birth.

Still Mr. Khalidi says there are many pluses like the fact that almost everyone he deals with in Şanliurfa on a daily basis, from the grocer and butcher to the baker and car repair person is Syrian, specifically Deiri, a fellow Deir Ezzour native.

Indeed Syrians have settled in certain Turkish cities and provinces depending on where they came from originally in Syria.

Şanliurfa borders Raqqa province so most Syrians there are from Raqqa and neighboring Deir Ezzour. Most Syrians in Hatay are from Idlib across the border and neighboring Hama. Those in Gaziantep and its surroundings are largely from Aleppo across the border. In border towns like Kilis and Reyhanli Syrians are now 75 percent and 60 percent of the population respectively[57].

Istanbul has the largest concentration of Syrians from all over, especially Damascenes, and they tend to gather in certain districts depending on their socioeconomic conditions and income levels. Merchants tend to be in the central Fatih district, workers and Syrians of modest means are mostly in Esenyurt district on the European side and Sultanbeyli on the Asian side. Many Syrian families who have some means and are conservative in their lifestyle are attracted to Başakşehir district, where gated communities with Islamic character have been growing since Islamists have started gaining political power in Turkey in the mid 1990s.

The area has seen further massive growth over the past decade as Syrians were joined in Turkey by hundreds of thousands of other Arabs from Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and other countries, fleeing the turmoil and conflicts triggered by the Arab Spring. Clusters of apartment high rises with names like Mavera 1, 2 & 3 and stores, cafes and restaurants with Arabic signs are everywhere.

A defected Syrian army officer from Damascus lives with his family in a gated community of 360 apartments, almost exclusively inhabited by other Syrians and Arabs. There's hardly any interaction with Turks in the area not even at the neighborhood mosque. Egyptians in the compound decided to convert the clubhouse into a mosque for Arabs.

Humanitarian Aid

In 2012 more Syrians began fleeing to neighboring countries like Turkey to escape the regime's deliberate targeting of opposition areas and anyone suspected of association with the opposition—a popular uprising morphed into war. The numbers of those fleeing kept increasing as the conflict widened and became more complex provoking one of the worst humanitarian disasters since the end of the Second World War. South and southeast Turkey served as staging grounds for a large-scale UN-led cross-border aid operation. This attracted hundreds of NGOs from all over the world to assist Syrians displaced in Syria and also those fleeing to Turkey.

But starting in 2016, and particularly following the coup attempt against President Erdoğan in the summer of that year, the Turkish government began expelling a number of foreign NGOs and seeking to exercise greater control over the sector and its operations. This coincided with the border restrictions imposed by Turkey and a decline year after year in the amount of aid allocated to the Syrian crisis in general.

About 1,000 aid trucks still go through each month from Turkey to northwest Syria via a single crossing and the bulk of aid still flowing to vulnerable Syrian refugees in Turkey comes largely from funds stemming from a deal between the Turkish state and the European Union reached in 2016.

Under the deal, Turkey would take all measures to stop people on its soil from entering Greece irregularly. Those reaching Greece could be turned back to Turkey and for every returned Syrian refugee EU member states would take one Syrian refugee in Turkey who had applied for resettlement[58]. In exchange Turkey would get 6 billion euros ($6.75 billion) to better the conditions of refugees and Turkish nationals would be able to travel to Europe without visas. (Visa free travel for Turks was never finalized.)

About 4.1 billion euros of the 6 billion euros has already been disbursed and the EU Council has allocated another half-a-billion euro in 2020 and 3 billion euros for the period 2021-2023, bringing the total allocations to 9.5 billion euros since the deal was struck[59].

Istanbul's Başakşehir district. Many Syrian families who have some means and are conservative in their lifestyle are attracted to Başakşehir, where gated communities with Islamic character have been growing since Islamists have started gaining political power in Turkey in the mid 1990s.

57 Armenak Tokmajyan and Kheder Khaddour, "Border Nation: The Reshaping of the Syrian-Turkish Borderlands", Carnegie Middle East Center, March 30, 2022.
58 International Rescue Committee, "What is the EU-Turkey Deal?" www.rescue.org/EU, March 18, 2022.
59 European Commission Press Release, "Turkey: EU Provides Further 325 Million Euros in Humanitarian Aid for Refugees", www.reliefweb.int, December 2, 2021.

Banners and van of Turkey's Republican People's Party (CHP) in Esenyurt's main square. The party has campaigned on the platform of returning all Syrian refugees back to Syria.

The EU funds go toward offsetting what it costs the Turkish state to allow access to healthcare, education and other government services to the 3.7 million Syrians under temporary protection and another estimated 330,000 Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians and Somalis under what Turkey calls international protection. Only some 1.5 million refugees, considered vulnerable and in need, get cash payments from the same EU money through transfers onto electronic debit cards administered by the Turkish Red Crescent Society. Families that qualify get 155 liras per family member each month and additional amounts ranging from 100 liras to 600 liras per family every three months[60].

Relations with Host Communities

In September 2019 President Erdoğan said Turkey has spent more than $40 billion on hosting Syrian refugees since 2011[61]. No further details were provided and no mention was made of the fact that much of these costs were offset by significant donor funds that have flowed through the Turkish state before and the after the EU deal in 2016 to help Syrian refugees.

Most Turks are unaware of the mechanics of the EU deal and assume all Syrians get cash handouts from the Turkish state. There's no real effort by Turkish officials or media to clarify the many misunderstandings and false perceptions or the deliberate misinformation on the part of some. Many Turks also accuse Syrians of taking their jobs when the reality is that Syrians are compelled to work for wages and under conditions few Turks would accept.

Turks are also upset that their soldiers are dying in military operations in Syria while they see Syrian military-age men living in Turkey. Many Turks assume Syrians "don't want to fight for their country" without understanding the real and complex circumstances that compelled Syrians to flee to Turkey. There's also a perception among some Turkish women that Syrian women are "stealing" their men because some Turkish men take on Syrian women as second wives as allowed by Islam, even though these Syrian wives usually have less or sometimes no rights under the law.

All of this has fueled a wave of hatred and racism toward Syrians and engendered animosity on both sides made worse by the current economic crisis engulfing Turkey, exploitation of the refugee issue by political parties in the 2019 local elections and ahead of the 2023 general election and a marked rise in inter-communal violence year after year.

Notable incidents include:

• In January 2022 a 19-year-old Syrian man was attacked and stabbed to death inside his room in the Istanbul district of Bayrampaşa, a day after a large mob attacked Syrians and Syrian-owned businesses in the district of Esenyurt further west[62].

• In November 2021, three young Syrian construction workers died in their room in Izmir after a Turkish assailant set it on fire[63].

• In August 2021, Syrians were attacked inside their homes and their properties were destroyed and looted in the district of Altindag in Ankara following the death of a Turkish youth in an altercation with Syrians[64].

Several Syrians and Syrian NGO directors interviewed in the city of Gaziantep said they have felt and experienced a marked rise in hostility toward Syrians. They said this has translated into verbal and physical assaults against anyone suspected of looking Syrian or heard speaking Arabic. They said Syrians were often openly rejected because of their identity when they tried to rent homes or apply for jobs.

"It's a nonstop barrage of rumors and misinformation, Syrians are being blamed for every problem," said one NGO director who preferred to remain anonymous.

The situation has been particularly tense in Şanliurfa, where on a number of occasions since 2017 Syrians had to stay home for fear of being attacked following deadly incidents involving Syrians and Turks.

The teacher Areej al-Khalidi says she and her children are frequently subjected to hostility and verbal assaults.

"My youngest son who's 10 is scared to go to school, where he's bullied and treated like a leper by his Turkish classmates; my daughter, who has a degree in environmental engineering and is fluent in Turkish, was doing an internship at the municipality and came back crying one day because she overheard her colleagues saying in Turkish 'how much longer are these animals staying here?'," said Ms. Khalidi.

For most Syrians the heart of the problem is the ambiguity in their legal status which has shaped the way they are perceived and interacted with by both the Turkish state and people. Even though they are labeled "refugees" Syrians say they are technically and legally "guests" who have been given "temporary protection" and will be asked or made to leave when they become "undesirable guests."

60 Türk Kizilay Press Release, "325 Million Euros Boost to the Largest Ever Humanitarian Programme", www.kizilay.org.tr, February 12, 2021.
61 TRT World Now, "Turkey Has Spent $40b to Provide for Syrian Refugees-Erdoğan", TRT World Now YouTube Channel, September 16, 2019.
62 Umar Farooq, "How Killing of Syrian Refugee Marks an Alarming Trend in Turkey", Al Jazeera, Jan 12, 2022.
63 Ibid.
64 Reuters, "Syrian Properties in Ankara Attacked After Youth Killed", www.reuters.com, August 12, 2021.

"We have been *Musafir* for 10 years," said one Syrian physician working with an NGO in Gaziantep referring to the Turkish word for guest traveler.

Also from the beginning the AKP-led government has often framed the issue of hosting Syrians in Islamic terms and within a Muslim's duty of solidarity with fellow Muslims facing adversity. Officials have sought to liken the dynamics of the relationship between Syrians and Turks to that of the Ansar and the *Muhajereen* during the time of Prophet Mohammed. When the Prophet left his native Mecca for Medina his followers abandoned everything and went there too and they became known as the *Muhajereen*, or the immigrants. The people of Medina, the Ansar, hosted them and shared everything with them. This of course has resonated with certain segments of Turkish society but they are the minority in viewing matters this way.

"It's very paternal, we cared for you, you should be grateful; the government, the people, everyone says that," said Razan Saffour, a British-Syrian researcher and advocacy and communications consultant who moved from Istanbul to Doha in January 2022.

When she was still in Istanbul Ms. Saffour and her Syrian friends tried to reach out to like-minded young Turks to brainstorm about ways to combat the rising xenophobia and to help correct some of the false narratives about Syrians. They made little progress because any effort was bound to be tangled in politics.

"There's massive polarization between secular and Muslim Turks, it's very ideological, everything is framed anti- or pro-Erdoğan," she said referring to the perception among many Turks that President Erdoğan allowed the Syrians in for political motives.

Ms. Saffour says Turks have made "no attempt to understand, reach out and open their spaces to Syrians."

There have been some efforts though to get Syrians and Turks to talk to each other but most so far have either not been sufficiently substantive or are very much in the early stages.

Ahmed al-Khalidi, director of the Şanliurfa-based civil society NGO, has been largely working on projects in the Syrian north but in 2019-2020 he and his colleagues moderated a series of focus group meetings that brought Syrians and Turks together to speak frankly with one another. But the effort paused when the COVID-19 pandemic started.

In 2019 a group of Syrian journalists and civil society figures in Istanbul launched a social media campaign around the time when Syrians were being deported from the city for not having valid temporary protection IDs, or Kimliks. The aim was to try to correct the falsehoods and misperceptions about Syrians. It was in Turkish and became a trending topic on Twitter. The campaign organizer, Syrian journalist and broadcaster Ghassan Yassine, said it was a success and led to a meeting with the governor of Istanbul who was eager to hear suggested solutions to the problems facing Syrians.

Other Syrians said the campaign backfired because it provoked more online attacks by those opposed to the Syrian presence and the Erdoğan government as well as reproach from pro government figures, both Syrian and Turkish, who wanted to tone things down. Many Syrians are afraid to be too outspoken because they believe it could lead to deportation.

"We feel impotent, all roads are closed, we can't make any peaceful pressure," to improve our conditions, said one young Syrian in Istanbul.

There are divisions among Syrians themselves about how they perceive their situation in Turkey and what if anything should be done to improve their conditions. These divisions are often along socioeconomic and generational lines and often mirror splits inside Syria itself particularly between rural and urban Syrians.

"There are some Syrians in their 20s and 30s who do not want to mix with other Syrians and they just want to be Turkish, we nickname them Surkis, and there are many Syrians who say be quiet and accept the situation," said Ms. Saffour.

Some Syrians, either by pragmatism or conviction, say it's incumbent on Syrians to make every effort to fit in and build bridges to Turkish society.

"The Turks have no racism whatsoever, they are civilized people; it's all our fault, we make noise and we're undisciplined," said a Damascus city native who moved to Istanbul in 2016 from Dubai and opened a chain of successful restaurants. "There are Syrian people here from the countryside that I have never come across when I was in Syria."

Syrian and Turkish women working side by side in a kitchen at the Mülteclir Dernegi NGO in Sultanbeyli. The kitchen runs a small catering business that supports the women.

Mustafa al-Nahas, a master coppersmith from Aleppo city, fled to Gaziantep with his family in 2013. He now has a successful workshop in Gaziantep's old bazaar with wholesale customers from all over Turkey. He lives in the neighborhood of Karataş, which reminds him of his area back in Aleppo. Two of his children have become Turkish citizens and one is working as an electrical engineer in Istanbul.

"A stranger has to be well-behaved, we're the ones who should accommodate them and assimilate with them," said Mr. al-Nahas, who is 57. "I'll never go to Europe, it's enough that I am in an Islamic country and I hear the call to prayers five times a day."

Political Dimension

The future of Syrians in Turkey is inextricably tied to internal Turkish politics as well as the political and security situation across the border inside Syria and shifting regional alliances. Any effort by Syrians in Turkey to advocate for their rights and improve their conditions is also tangled in intra-Syrian political dynamics.

"In the beginning the government's thinking was that we could take in many Syrians because it was only temporary, the regime in Damascus was going to fall and Syrians would return and they would never forget what Turkey did for them," said Khaled Khoja, who hails from a Turkish family that fled political turmoil in Turkey in the 1930s and settled in Damascus, where he was born in 1965.

Mr. Khoja lived in Syria until his teenage years before fleeing to Turkey in the 1980s after he and his parents were arrested during the Syrian regime's bloody crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and all political opponents.

"Love Erdogan" sign in the Turkish border town of Reyhanli. It is part of Hatay province and has a population of more than 150,000 Syrians and about 100,000 Turks.

Between 2015 and 2016 Mr. Khoja headed the main Syrian opposition coalition which was largely operating from inside Turkey. He's now a member of the Turkish Future Party, which was formed by former Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu after he left Mr. Erdoğan's AK Party.

Mr. Khoja said the big shift for Syrians in Turkey began to happen in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt against Mr. Erdoğan who was then forced to ally his party with the far-right nationalist Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party known by its Turkish initials MHP) in order to consolidate his power, pass the 2017 referendum on the presidential system and win another five-year term in 2018. The MHP wants Syrians to be returned to Syria and it supports reestablishing relations with the Syrian regime, maintaining closer ties with Russia, Iran and China and adopting a more confrontational stance toward the EU on a range of issues including refugees.

So in a way Mr. Erdoğan and his AK Party had to balance their previously open-door and accommodating policies toward Syrians against the hardline positions of a key member of their governing coalition and take into account an increasingly hostile mood among their own electorate toward Syrians. About 60 percent of those who back the AKP and around 65 percent of those who support the MHP are unhappy for one reason or another with the Syrian presence. Nearly 80 percent of Turks want Syrians to return home[65].

Mr. Erdoğan's statement about the $40 billion purportedly spent on Syrian refugees coupled with his seemingly contradictory statements about whether Syrians would have to go back to Syria at some point and whether more Syrians would be granted Turkish citizenship have been seized on by his opponents as fodder for mobilizing public support.

Parties across the political spectrum—the social-democratic Republican People's Party (CHP), the left-wing Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and a slew of right-wing and nationalist parties like the Good Party (Iyi) and Zafer Party—have turned the Syrian presence into a key electoral issue. They accuse Mr. Erdoğan of wanting to give Syrians citizenship in order to boost his own electoral base.

"We have become a political commodity here," said a Syrian from Damascus living and working in Turkey since 2014.

The Syrian presence was a central issue in the 2019 local elections which saw the opposition clinch a number of important wins like the mayorship of Istanbul. It's also shaping to be one of the top issues in the general election in 2023. Officials from all opposition parties, including party heads, parliament members and those holding top posts in local governments have continued to make provocative and at times inciting statements about Syrians.

In September 2021 Antakya mayor Lütfü Savaş who belongs to the CHP party said "Syrians were socially and intellectually 30 to 40 years behind Turks" urging the international community to take steps to insure the return of Syrians to Syria[66].Before that another mayor from the same party, Tanju Ozcan of the city of Bolu east of Istanbul, wanted to charge Syrians 10 times more for water and other municipal services before a court struck down these measures[67].

65 Alan Makovsky, "Turkey's Refugee Dilemma: Tiptoeing Toward Integration", Center for American Progress, March 13, 2019.
66 Zaiton, "New Racist Statements Against Syrians in Turkey", www.zaitonmag.com, September 19, 2021.
67 Daily Sabah, "'Fascist' Turkish Mayor to Charge Syrians with Tenfold Water Bill", www.dailysabah.com, July 26, 2021.

Street Scene with National Election Campaign Banners, Kilis, Turkey, in 2011. Wikimedia commons / Adam Jones.

Officials from the Iyi Party, which launched the #SuriyelilerSuriyeye (Syrians to Syria) on Twitter in January 2019 and which went viral during a period of increased violence against Syrians in 2020, have not ceased speaking out against the Syrian presence and spreading false, surreal and at times demeaning narratives about Syrians[68].

And in January 2022 the head of the CHP and one of the leading presidential contenders in 2023 Kemal Kiliçdaroğlu renewed his pledge to return Syrians home and reestablish diplomatic ties with the Assad regime if he's elected into office.

"Don't you worry. We will send our Syrian siblings to their homes with drums and zurnas within two years at the latest," he told a rally in Mersin[69].

But the big question remains where to in Syria and under what conditions?

A decade-long effort by the United Nations to broker a political solution has gone nowhere as Bashar al-Assad renewed his mandate in 2021 for another seven years in a vote organized by his regime and which failed to adhere to the standards for free and fair elections.

Much of Syria's territory is controlled by Mr. Assad with the backing of Iran and Russia but conditions for most people there have deteriorated year after year with more than 90 percent of the population living below the poverty line and 12.4 million of the estimated 16 million still in Syria classified as food insecure[70].

Most of the areas from which people fled to Turkey remain heavily damaged with no funds to rebuild. Many of these areas have become military and security zones and are off limits to any returning civilians. The regime is intent on engineering demographic changes in these destroyed areas. The regime also continues to arrest suspected opponents and has tightened military conscription rules, both are major obstacles to return. In addition, Bashar al-Assad has tied any refugee returns to the lifting of sanctions, restoration of diplomatic ties and provision of reconstruction funds by the West. The economic cost of the war was estimated at $1.2 trillion as of 2021[71].

In northwest Syria, a tenuous ceasefire is being policed by Turkish and Russian forces after the Turkish army conducted drone strikes to halt further regime advances toward Idlib and prevent more refugees from fleeing to Turkey; about 60 Turkish soldiers were killed in a regime counterattack[72]. The fate of several million internally displaced Syrians in the area remains in limbo as a large part of Idlib is under the rule of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former Al-Qaeda affiliate that has sought to control every aspect of people's lives.

Following three major military operations against U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in the north, Turkey is now in control of three enclaves in the north where it installed an army and a temporary government that report to Turkey. There has been on and off talk of returning Syrian refugees currently inside Turkey to these areas but most Syrians won't go back.

"You can't live in the north unless you are under the protection of one faction or another," said a Syrian who had fled northeast Syria to Şanlıurfa.

68 DFRLab, "Anti-immigrant Hashtag Amplified by Turkish Opposition Party", www.medium.com, October 8, 2020.
69 Daily Sabah, "CHP Chair Kiliçdaroğlu Vows to Send All Syrians Home from Turkey", www.dailysabah.com, January 4, 2022.
70 Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, "Syria: Unprecedented Rise in Poverty Levels in the Face of Large Decline in Funding for Humanitarian Aid", October 17, 2022.
71 World Vision, "Ten Years of War in Syria has Cost $1.2 Trillion According to World Vision", www.worldvision.org , March 4, 2021.
72 Al Jazeera, "Rocket Attack in Northwest Syria Kills Two Turkish Soldiers", www.Aljazeera.com, March 20, 2020.

Indeed the two northern enclaves are surrounded by U.S.-backed Kurdish forces that are at war with Turkey. They control a large part of northeast and eastern Syria where the threat of a resurgence of Islamic State is ever present.

Many Syrians believe their continued presence in Turkey is contingent on Erdoğan staying in power. Even those who received Turkish citizenship believe it could be taken away from them if Erdoğan and his party lose in 2023—a possibility raised by Turkish lawmakers hostile to the Syrian presence. Some lawmakers have gone as far as wanting to ban naturalized Syrians from voting in Turkish elections.

"For sure we'll face many difficulties if the ruling party changes," said a Syrian businessman who has made large investments in Istanbul, Izmir and Mersin over the past few years.

Mr. Khoja, the Syrian-Turkish politician, says these fears are exaggerated because even if the social democratic CHP wins in 2023 it won't be able to govern without the support of other parties like his own Future Party, which is a lot more circumspect about doing deals with the Assad regime or sending Syrians back without a final political settlement.

Any attempt by the Syrians in Turkey to organize themselves, advocate for their rights and have a greater say over their future regardless of who's in power in Turkey is complicated by the fact that Syrians themselves are as polarized and divided as Turks.

Islamists and secularists do not see eye to eye on almost every topic, be it the future of Syria or how to improve relations with Turks. Then there are those among Syrians in Turkey who support Assad and the regime versus those who vilify anyone who has to return to regime-controlled parts of Syria or maintain contact with people there for family reasons.

The same urban-rural split inside Syria is also mirrored among Syrians in Turkey. Some urban Syrians from Aleppo including some who acquired Turkish citizenship were cheering advances by the Syrian Army in 2020 even though Turkish soldiers were killed by the regime. On the other side, there are some Syrians from the Aleppo countryside who are so hostile to the regime that they verbally assault fellow Syrians who are forced to go to the Syrian consulate to get a passport or other official documents.

"We have all the extremes: extreme loyalty to Erdoğan and his party, extreme fear of doing or saying anything that might get you deported and now even extreme hostility toward Turks because we think that they all hate us," said a Damascene living and working in Istanbul since 2014 who preferred to remain anonymous.

Long-Term Prospects

It's an uncertain future for most Syrians in Turkey and rising xenophobia and hostility is leading many to ponder their options. Returning to Syria is hardly safe or viable for most of them as they see more Syrians doing everything and paying large sums of money to smugglers just to leave Syria and come to Turkey (up to $3,200 for safe passage from Azaz in Syria to Kilis in Turkey). Many young Syrians say the only reason they remain in Turkey is because they have parents and close relatives still in Syria whom they support financially and want to be able to meet from time to time (Turkey allowed Syrians residing in Turkey under temporary protection or any other status to cross the border and visit their families during Muslim holidays and Syrians could fly to and from Aleppo and Damascus via third countries like Lebanon. Turkey halted this practice in 2022)[73].

Yaser al-Dhiab, a native of Deir Ezzour who fled with his family to the Turkish city of Şanliurfa in 2015, checking the work of his employees. He was an oil engineer in Syria but decided to make a living in Şanliurfa by starting a small business that makes Muslim prayer beads.

Resettlement from Turkey to a Western country through the UNHCR and other agencies is only possible for a very small percentage of the Syrian refugee population leading many to still take significant risks to reach Europe irregularly. Since the EU-Turkey deal in 2016 the crossing has become a lot more perilous and it's mostly undertaken by young men. Married ones often leave wives and children behind in Turkey.

73 Saeed Abdulrazek, "Turkey Bans Syrians from Spending Adha Eid at Home", Asharq Al-Awsat, June 12, 2022.

"In Syria some people are selling their organs just to survive; the immense pressures Syrians face inside Syria and in Lebanon and Turkey will not remain confined to the borders of these places," said Ahmed al-Khalidi, the Şanliurfa-based civil society NGO director.

Even those Syrians with citizenship or legal residency and work permits in Turkey and are doing relatively well compared to others are concerned about the future. Some of those that became citizens are thinking of moving to Gulf Arab countries like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates where they think they'll feel more comfortable and welcome and also have an easier time with a Turkish passport than a Syrian one. But only a few have this option.

A 31-year-old Damascene who prefers to be anonymous fled Syria in 2012 because he was going to be arrested for his role in organizing and taking part in protests against the regime. He first went to Lebanon with his parents but they only stayed there for a few months before going to Egypt in March 2013. They had to leave a year later to Turkey after the Egyptian military retook power and the country became less hospitable to Syrians.

He has been in Turkey for eight years and now lives in Istanbul with his wife. He has residency and work permits. They both have good jobs but he's increasingly worried about his future particularly after the violent events in Ankara in the summer of 2021.

"I have never felt stable in Turkey and I see the situation getting much worse, there are many alarming signs, but the problem is that there are no more places to escape to," he said.

He has many Turkish friends and considers five of them close and he often has discussions with them about the reality for Syrians in Turkey. He's also appreciative of the efforts some government officials make in combatting the misinformation about Syrians but believes none of this stands a chance in the face of the deluge of negativity and hostility coming from those who want Syrians out.

But beyond the current atmosphere for Syrians in Turkey there are often more personal and emotional reasons why Syrians may decide to stay or leave.

"The crux of the problem is do we give up completely on returning to Syria and do everything to adapt and settle in Turkey, it's an immensely charged and complicated issue," says Bahjat Hajjar, a 45-year-old who once had a successful retail clothing business in Syria.

Mr. Hajjar fled Syria after his brother was arrested on charges of "terrorism" for supporting people displaced from opposition areas due to regime bombardment. His first stop was Lebanon but then left for Turkey where he joined an NGO founded by his cousin focused on supporting local administrative councils in opposition-held areas. He's still doing this work and spends his time between Gaziantep close to Syria and Istanbul where his wife and children are settled. They were all granted Turkish citizenship in 2017. The family is split on what to do if there's ever real change in Syria.

"My son, who is in grade 9, tells me I 'do not want to return even if Bashar falls'; he says 'I want to live here, my friends are here and I want to go to university here," said Mr. Hajjar.

Sarah Faour and her mother and three siblings fled to Lebanon from Damascus after her father, uncle and their friend were killed by regime thugs in September 2012. The family's first stop was Lebanon but they could not survive there and went to Turkey in 2013 where they first lived in a refugee camp near the border but then moved to Istanbul. In May 2015 they decided to use $20,000 her mother got from a family inheritance to pay for their way to Europe as hundreds of thousands of Syrians and other people were doing at the time.

The family reached Germany and settled in the city of Leipzig in the east. Both Sarah and her mom are veiled and she said they found it extremely hard to adapt in Germany or to get over the hostility they felt at the beginning. So they decided to relinquish their asylum status in Germany and returned to Turkey in September 2015.

"They call us the family of the crazies: they reached Germany and returned," said Ms. Faour jokingly.

Syrian fast food restaurants now dominate Istanbul's Fatih district, another area very popular with Syrians and other immigrants and refugees that have flocked to the city in recent years.

Hair studio in Esenyurt, where Arabic signs proliferate much to the chagrin of many Turks.

Upon her return she joined the Karam Foundation as they were establishing their first outpost in the city of Reyhanli in Hatay Province. She now runs their family program and is finishing her studies at a Turkish university in Hatay. She became a citizen in 2020.

"We bought a house and we feel a lot more stable now," said Ms. Faour

Fadi Hakim, an Aleppo native who is a dentist by profession and works as advocacy manager at the Syrian American Medical Society in Gaziantep, says while the situation is tough for Syrians in Turkey it's also important to remember the context of their presence in the country.

"Thirty years ago Turks were leaving their own country but now you have everyone coming in, Turkey is becoming a hub for many of those oppressed by their countries and rulers," he said. "It will take time for Turks to adjust to this and Syrians will have to struggle, maybe for decades, for their rights."

Razan Saffour says that despite all the difficulties many Syrians, particularly in a metropolis like Istanbul, have succeeded in carving out their own spaces.

"It's almost like if you flip Istanbul over, you will encounter the Syrian and Arab Istanbul; it exists and people have been able to work on things in an easier way," she said pointing to the media and creative fields where Syrians have excelled.

A Turkish Perspective

Refugees and migrants are nothing new for the Turkish republic and the Ottoman Empire before it. Some half a million Sephardic Jews escaping the Spanish Inquisition found refuge in Turkey in the 15th Century. Between the mid 19th and early 20th centuries several million Chechens, Circassians and Tatars migrated to Turkey. There were also several large waves of immigration from the Balkans not to mention the population exchange between Greece and Turkey after the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

But the Syrian influx is the largest within the shortest period and it comes at a time of heightened nationalism and a backlash against immigrants and refugees all over the world instrumentalized and exploited by populist political leaders everywhere. Add to that the fact that the country has seen large influxes of refugees from other parts of the world during the same period most notably Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Somalia. The Turkish government has also not reconciled itself yet to the idea that most Syrians are likely going to stay for a long time. It has yet to focus on policies that promote better integration of Syrians into local communities.

"Nobody was prepared for this, was the U.S. and EU prepared? Turkey is trying to adapt and establish systems but there are too many people," said Tahsin Gedik, program manager at the Refugees Association NGO which supports Syrians and other refugees in Istanbul's Sultanbeyli district.

"Refugees are still coming across the border, the flow never stopped and they are too mobile."

Mustafa Yilmaz, a 22-year-old theater actor and fashion model who also works in his family's restaurant in Istanbul, says he feels the government has not sufficiently thought through the economic and social consequences of allowing this many people in all at once.

Mr. Yilmaz describes himself as "open-minded" and a "free-spirit." He once shared his apartment with a Syrian refugee studying architecture. He says he has nothing against refugees but adds that he and many Turks around his age are troubled to see their country host so many refugees at a time when many Turkish university graduates can't find work and can barely survive under the current economic conditions.

"Most Turkish people feel the government has prioritized refugees over them," said Mr. Yilmaz.

"I think if we can't prioritize Turkish people then we have to reassess the refugee presence."

Pelin, a 32-year-old mother who runs a business with her husband in a touristy part of Istanbul, says many Turks feel their whole way of life is under assault amid a sharp deterioration in both their own standard of living and the quality of public services they receive, most notably healthcare and education. And they link it to the influx of Syrian refugees.

"People fight with me when I try to explain to them that it's not the fault of refugees," says Pelin.

Her husband, who is a native of Adana and hails from a family that immigrated to Turkey in the early 20th century, said the "violence and aggression" and what he called the "culture of lynching" was becoming unbearable.

The couple share people's grievances and have to deal with the same problems facing all Turks but they are against scapegoating immigrants. If things do not change the couple are considering joining many of their friends who have gone to Berlin, London and other European capitals in the past six years.

Fayeza Gümüşlüoğlu, a Turkish foreign affairs journalist and broadcaster in Istanbul, says there's little to counter a mainstream media narrative adopted by many Turks that sees refugees, particularly Syrians, as taking their jobs by agreeing to work for less.

"But nobody blames the factory owner who's exploiting workers," she says.

She feels few in Turkey want to face the reality that "Syrians have been with us for 10 years and will probably be with us for another 10-20 years or more."

Turan Kişlakçi, who worked in government-owned media for 20 years and helped launch the Arabic language service of state broadcaster TRT, says the government's priority so far has been security and politics when it comes to the Syrian presence.

"The government just focuses on security and control and hardly on integration," he said.

Last year he launched an initiative called Mahjar, a collective of artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians, who are all immigrants and refugees from all over the world living in Turkey.

The idea is to have performances, exhibits and workshops all over Turkey.

He's trying to gather support from both the national government and local governments for his initiative.

"It's a way to diffuse hatred and polarization and broaden people's horizon; we also want refugees to be confident and successful," he said.

Collaboration and Coexistence

Despite the difficult circumstances of Syrians in Turkey there are encouraging signs that there are people on the Turkish side who recognize the problems and are already thinking of ways to lessen conflict and striving for Turks and Syrians to at least better understand each other and coexist. There also many heartening examples of Syrians refusing to be held back by these difficulties and are launching business and creative ventures, advancing in their studies and careers and supporting one another to progress and fulfill their potential. Here are a few examples:

• **Mülteclir Dernegi (Refugees Association) –** The association was formed in 2014 with the goal of supporting refugees at the district and municipal level and trying to foster better understanding and relations between them and local authorities and communities. So far it only operates in Sultanbeyli, a district on the Asian side of Istanbul with a total population of about 350,000 including about 20,000 refugees of whom 95 percent are Syrian. The association opened another branch in 2021 in Umraniye, also a district on the Asian side, and plans to expand to other districts of Istanbul, which is home to the largest concentration of Syrians in all of Turkey.

In Sultanbeyli municipal officials and other representatives of the community sit on the board of the association, which receives local and international donor funds. The association has also organized a council of representatives drawn from the refugee community that meets once a month to discuss issues of concern. The association has established a community center in Sultanbeyli open to everyone and which provides onsite services including physical and mental healthcare, legal counselling, educational and schooling support, language courses, community activities and workshops, career advice and vocational training and humanitarian aid to those most in need. Each family is assigned a case worker to help them overcome all problems they face in navigating the system in Turkey.

"This partnership with the municipalities could be a great model," said Tahsin Gedik, the association's program manager. "Turks and Syrians do not know each other, people are afraid of what they do not know. We want people to start talking to one another and to understand that refugees are just people like them who want to survive and live better."

Mr. Gedik said there are encouraging signs on the government side like for example the Ministry of Interior's Directorate General for Migration Management and the Ministries of Health and Education among others actively seeking out the input of associations like his on what needs to be done to improve the lives of Syrians and other refugees and promote greater social cohesion and harmony with host communities.

• **Syrian-Turkish Technology Entrepreneur Mojahed Akil –** Akil was born in 1989 in Saudi Arabia where his family had fled in the early 1980s to escape the Assad regime's crackdown on political opponents like his grandfather Salim Akil, who was imprisoned for nine years. Akil was 16 when his family returned to their native Aleppo in 2005. He was into computer modelling and programming and launched his own website design business when he was still in school. He got involved in the peaceful protests that started in 2011 and was imprisoned and tortured before fleeing in September 2012 to Turkey, where he was joined by his parents and sister.

Akil's first stop was Gaziantep where he learned Turkish and worked for a Turkish programming and software development company. He launched a mobile application called Gherbitna which provided Syrians and other refugees arriving in Turkey with information on how to obtain temporary protection status or residency, what they needed to start a business in Turkey, get a job and other survival basics.

Syrian-Turkish tech entrepreneur Mojahed Akil at his office in Istanbul's Şişli district. He fled from his native Aleppo in 2012 and has since launched several successful tech ventures in Turkey including a food delivery app called Joaan. He and his family became Turkish citizens in 2019.

Akil was featured in Google's annual conference in Silicon Valley in 2016 but could not travel to the U.S. because his visa application was rejected. That same year Akil signed a contract with Turk Telekom, a mobile and internet service provider, that made Gherbitna its representative for the Arabic-speaking market in Turkey. He also launched Tarjemli, a live Arabic-Turkish translation service that became very popular but could not be developed further because of lack of funding.

In 2019 Akil and his wife and son, who was born in Turkey, became Turkish citizens. That same year he launched a food delivery application called Joaan, which means hungry in Arabic. Akil also became well versed in venture capital financing and has managed to attract several rounds of investments for Joaan. While he's hardly a match for food delivery app giants in Turkey like Trendyol and Yemeksepeti, he has decided to focus on niche aspects of the market. For example he's working with Turkish restaurants to reach non-Turkish-speaking customers and working with Arabic restaurants to reach Turkish and non-Arabic speaking customers. Akil also has a company that provides app and software development services to Arab companies doing business in Turkey and Europe and is involved in an e-commerce venture called B-Bazar.

"I face racism in Turkey, I confront it but I do not let it consume me," said Akil recounting how once he went to a government office in Istanbul to pay his taxes and was told by an employee "what are you doing here, when will you go home, our soldiers are dying in Syria."

Akil says he keeps telling Turks that Syrians are no different from them: "There may be some bad apples among us but do not make us all pay for this, we work hard, we're being exploited in factories, we pay rent, spend money in the economy, pay taxes and we're starting businesses."

• **Karam House** – Lina Sergie Attar, a Syrian-American architect and writer who hails from Aleppo and lives in Chicago, started Karam Foundation in 2007 as a food drive on the South Side of Chicago. Karam means generosity in Arabic. When peaceful protests gave way to conflict in Syria, Karam Foundation focused on the ensuing humanitarian crisis inside the country and as it spilled into neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The underlying theme in most of the foundation's activities is the empowerment of Syrians—helping them preserve their dignity and giving them the tools to fulfill their dreams and potential.

In 2016 Sergie-Attar established the first Karam House in Reyhanli, a Turkish town close to the Syrian border that became the first stop for most fleeing Syrians. It was conceived as an after school community innovation workspace where Syrian youth between the age 14 and 18 can discover themselves and their passions and learn new skills in science, technology, arts and media. Young Syrians learn critical thinking, problem solving and presentation skills and how to manage their time, plan projects, work in teams, make connections with others and pursue fulfilling education and career paths.

Karam House runs a creative program in which students must complete 8 studios. So far more than 130 students have completed the program both at the Reyhanli site and the one opened in Istanbul in 2018. A team of mentors also helps those in Turkish secondary schools prepare for university and apply for scholarships both in Turkey and abroad.

"Our big goal is to produce 10,000 leaders," said Feras Shashaa, manager of Karam House- Reyhanli.

For many Syrian teenagers Karam House has become a safe space of healing and inspiration where they can get help and advice on any difficulties they face in Turkish schools or in their own families and communities.

"Beit Karam is helping change Reyhanli, at first they criticized them for being coed and coming from America to supposedly 'corrupt the youth' but now people understand," said 17-year-old Mohamad Abu-Hasna, who dreams of becoming a filmmaker.

Students and staff at the Karam House in Reyhanli. In 2016 Lina Sergie-Attar, a Syrian American architect and writer, established the first Karam House in Reyhanli, a Turkish town close to the Syrian border that became the first stop for most fleeing Syrians.

A special program at Karam House provides financial aid to some needy families which often have to put their children to work in order to survive. The payments are contingent on children going to school.

Aya al-Masri was 12 when her parents and three siblings arrived in Turkey in 2015. Her father worked in construction and her young teenage brother worked in a textile factory for 12 hours a day. The situation got worse when her father abandoned the family and returned to Syria on his own. Aya was having lots of difficulties in school and failed her class twice. With the help of Karam House her brother went back to school and is now in nursing school. She's back on track finishing high school and her two youngest sisters are in primary school.

"Without Beit Karam I do not think we would have made it; they impacted us profoundly and steered us in the right direction," said Ms. Al-Masri who turned 18 last year.

The Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales (LAGeSo) in Berlin is the place where Syrian refugees had to register. Wikimedia commons / Martin Lindner.

GERMANY

Omran, a native of the Damascus district of Mezzeh, left Syria in early 2013 at the age of 20 to escape mandatory military service in the Syrian Army. He worked as a barber for over a year in the Egyptian Red Sea resort town of Hurghada.

"People accepted us at first but then after the coup they hated us," he said referring to the attitude of Egyptians toward Syrians before and after the military takeover of power in Egypt in the summer of 2013.

In September 2014, Omran used his savings to pay smugglers for sea passage from Alexandria to the Libyan coast and onward to Italy. He and some 250 other people were moved from one rickety boat to another in a journey lasting 8 days.

His plan was to reach the Swedish city of Malmö where he knew some people but he was apprehended by German police in Munich. He and others were first put up in an indoor basketball court in Munich and then moved to tents near Düsseldorf as they underwent the initial process of registering as asylum seekers.

Pending review of his asylum application, Omran was issued a 3-month Tolerated Stay Permit (Duldung) and transferred to what Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) calls a "reception facility" and refugees commonly call "heim" or "camp" in Brandenburg, the eastern state encircling Berlin. He stayed briefly at a facility in Eisenhüttenstadt, east of Berlin at the Polish border, before moving to another facility nearby in Frankfurt an der Oder, where he spent three months.

"People looked at us with aggression and hostility; I felt people wanted to distance themselves from us and did not consider us human," said Omran. "But of course there were Germans that helped us a lot, one of them is still my friend until this day."

Omran was granted refugee protection which gave him a three-year residency permit and allowed him access to social and housing assistance while he learned German and looked for a job. He moved to Oranienburg, north of Berlin, where he decided to finish high school after attaining the B1 level in German fluency. He lived with a German family in nearby Birkenwerder. It was a tough time for him. He was older than other students in school and he felt his German hosts were putting too much pressure on him "to be like them."

He persevered, finished high school, moved to Berlin and shortly after enrolled at the University of Potsdam. By then he had permanent residency. He received a degree in education, completed two teaching internships and then got a master's degree with a specialty in teaching German language to children of immigrant parents.

Since May 2021 Omran has been teaching at Rütli Schule in Berlin's Neukölln District—the school has transformed in recent years from having a reputation for dysfunction and violence to being a more hopeful place and even a model institution[74].

74 Deutsche Welle, "A School Makeover", www.dw.com, February 28, 2010.

"They love me in school, I feel worthy," he said. "My students are Albanians, Germans, Israelis, Japanese, Moroccans, Palestinians and Turks."

In October 2021, Omran became a German citizen after fulfilling all the requirements.

The past seven years have been transformative for Omran on every level. He had a German girlfriend for two years and "tried everything in Germany" as he likes to say but then in recent years he found himself gravitating again toward Islam because it puts him "at peace." He started praying and gave up drinking and all that was "unsuitable" for him. He got married remotely to his best friend's sister. She's still in Damascus but plans to join him in Berlin as her application to unify with Omran is processed at the German embassy in Lebanon.

"Can you imagine the shock for a veiled Eastern woman, who has never left Damascus, coming to Boxhagener Platz in Berlin," he said with a smile referring to his boisterous Berlin neighborhood known for its nightlife.

Omran says he still is outgoing, proud of what he's achieved in Germany, goes to parties but does not drink, has German friends and plays soccer with immigrants and Germans. He loves Berlin but his least favorite place is Sonnenallee, colloquially known as "Arab Street," because he feels it reinforces the stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in German society.

Omran isn't sure yet about starting a family in Germany. He says his wife will have a say too. He says there are too many social norms in Germany that clash with his own traditions and beliefs. He wonders if he can ever be German while maintaining his Syrian and Islamic identity and whether this will be accepted by Germans. But he does not think isolating himself from German society and interacting only with fellow Syrians and Muslims as many immigrants do is "healthy." Maybe he and his wife will eventually have to move to a Muslim country but maybe not.

Omran is not alone. Many of the estimated 850,000 Syrians who have been granted asylum or another form of protection in Germany since the start of the conflict in Syria in 2011 as well as the some 20,000 who have become citizens in 2021 and the thousands more applying for citizenship are asking similar questions and also wondering what the future holds for them[75].

Seven years after the world watched Germans welcome hundreds of thousands of Syrians and other refugees both the immigrants and their newly adopted country now stand at crossroads.

How many of those still on short-term residencies will become permanent residents? How will Germany handle the backlog of citizenship applications and how many will ultimately be naturalized? What will happen to those whose asylum is rejected, will they eventually be deported to Syria or a third country? For those Syrians who qualify, how soon can they bring over their loved ones from Syria or third countries to Germany?

Most Syrians are grateful to Germans for helping them at their greatest hour of need and desperation when most Western nations looked away while their Arab brethren treated them like a threat. Many Syrians have made great strides within a relatively short time but in a way now comes the hard part as they ponder their future in Germany, grapple with issues of identity and acceptance, deal with new gender and generational dynamics among themselves and confront lingering trauma and grief and separation from their loved ones and homeland.

Many Syrians feel they fulfilled or even exceeded the language, work, study and cultural requirements of integration—notwithstanding the fact they have great misgivings about this term and do not fully comprehend it—but that the onus is always on them to prove themselves and their good intentions while most Germans have not tried to meet them half-way. What they sense from the other side ranges from pity and a patronizing we-know-what's-best-for-you attitude on both the left and right to indifference, mistrust, hostility and a rejection of them as potential partners with equal rights and obligations.

Immigration and refugees were not among the main issues in Germany's election in 2021 as Germans continued to focus on the economy, fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and most recently the sharpening standoff between Russia and the West (which culminated in February 2022 with Russia's invasion of Ukraine). The new governing coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democrats has vowed to bolster the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers[76].Many though feel Germany remains reluctant to tackle a more fundamental long-term question made more urgent by the Syrian influx: Are Germans ready to accept that their country has de facto become a nation of immigrants and will it lead to rethinking what it means to be German?

Anti-racism banner in Köln reads "no racism in this neighborhood".

75 Richard Connor, "Number of Syrians Becoming German Citizens Triples in 2021", Deutsche Welle, June 10, 2022.
76 Sertan Sanderson, "New German Government to Introduce Sweeping Changes to Migration Policy", Info Migrants, November 25, 2021.

Employee of Baladna.

There's hardly consensus on this question and there are both signs of trouble and hope.

The Alternative for Germany (AfD as it's known by its German acronym), which capitalized on anti-immigration sentiments to enter the Bundestag in 2017, did poorly nationally in the 2021 elections but increased its popularity in the East—it came in first in Saxony and Thuringia where many Syrians have settled[77].

While the circumstances are totally different and the support Syrians have received is the envy of other immigrant groups in Germany, there's a sense among some Syrians and Germans that Syrians will end up in their own "parallel society" and face the same challenges experienced by Turks who came in as guest workers after the second World War.

But on a more hopeful note, at least 83 of the 736 lawmakers elected to the Bundestag in 2021 have an immigrant background including two female lawmakers whose parents were born in Syria[78]. A Syrian-Kurd who came to Germany in 2005 won a seat in Berlin's local parliament.

Legal Status

In 2021 Germany received more than 190,000 asylum applications, the highest since 2017, according to figures released in January by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge or BAMF). The largest number of applicants were Syrians at more than 70,000 followed by Afghans at more than 31,000[79]. Authorities said much of this spike is due to a backlog in applications induced by the COVID-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions.

It's worth noting that around 18 percent of applications came from children under the age of one, many of them Syrians, who were born in Germany. Under current laws, newborns do not get citizenship unless one of the parents has been living in Germany for more than eight years or has permanent residency.

At the current rate, Syrians are expected to overtake Poles as the second largest immigrant group after Turks but still many Syrians worry that their legal status in Germany is not on firm ground. Their concerns can be summed up as follows:

• **Two tracks** – Syrians who arrived before changes to the asylum laws in October 2015 and then in March 2016 received full refugee status which entitled them to three-year residency permits and put them on a shorter track to becoming permanent residents and ultimately citizens if they met the requirements. Those that came after the law changes were given subsidiary protection with a one-year residency permit subject to renewal which meant that they had to wait longer and meet stricter criteria for permanent residency.

• **Waiting to unite with loved ones** – The process of applying for a family member to come from Syria or a third country is generally slow for everyone. Those granted asylum however are entitled to it right away and have a smoother path than those under subsidiary protection provided this unification meets certain conditions.

• **Outcomes depend on the disposition of local immigration offices** – The degree of difficulty or ease in obtaining a residency permit, bringing over family members to Germany and applying for citizenship often depends on the particular Ausländerbehörde (immigration office) that refugees have to deal with in their state of residence. Syrians say the varying trajectories and outcomes are not only by state but also by city within the same state and even by individual immigration officer.

• **Specter of deportation** – Although Germany has not deported anyone since it allowed a ban on deportation to Syria to lapse at the end of 2020, many Syrians who remain on tenuous asylum and residency grounds worry about this and see the whole issue of deportation as being dependent on the vagaries of German and European Union politics. (It is worth noting that the "refugee status" and "subsidiary protection status" issued by the BAMF does not allow deportation and thus protects refugees).

77 Emily Schultheis, "Germany's Far-Right AfD Loses Nationally, but Wins in the East", www.Politico.eu, September 28, 2021.
78 Kirsten Grieshaber, "Germany's Diversity Shows as Immigrants Run for Parliament", Associated Press, September 22, 2021.
79 Natasha Mellersh, "Sharp Rise in Asylum Applications in Germany", Info Migrants, January 12, 2022.

Yara Mayassah and Mohammad Adam, two Syria natives who came to Germany as refugees now live in the city Erfurt, where they are very vocal and active in efforts to combat violence and racism against refugees. Photo taken in Oct 2021.

Dr. Zaidoun Al-Zoabi was imprisoned twice by the Syrian regime when he was still in Damascus and later gained a high profile for his role in humanitarian and relief efforts in southern Turkey and northern Syria. He later went to Berlin to complete post-doctoral studies and was on a student visa. His wife joined him and was granted asylum because she was married to someone (Dr. Al-Zoabi) who faced political persecution.

But when Dr. Al-Zoabi finished his studies the only way he could stay in Germany legally was to apply for subsidiary/temporary protection. Dr. Al-Zoabi jokes that according to this logic he's "the husband of the activist's wife."

His wife has permanent residency now and can become a citizen while his path is a lot more complicated and lengthy.

"If I knew, I would have hired a lawyer; people can easily sink in all these complexities," he said.

Sulaiman Abdullah, a journalist from northeast Syria, arrived in Germany in late 2012 after a sojourn in Turkey. It took him a while to secure asylum and was only issued a residency permit about two years later when rules were eased around the time of the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

He settled in the city of Hanover in the state of Lower Saxony, where he worked and immersed himself in German language studies. He applied for citizenship with local authorities because he believed he met the length of residency, self-sufficiency, language and integration requirements. He said the immigration officer told him he was rejected because he "did not have enough work experience."

Mr. Abdullah left Hanover and moved to Berlin where he decided to apply for citizenship for a second time in April 2021. He was told that he needed to make an appointment first for a beratung, or consultation. He told the local officer that he did not need this session and just wanted to make an appointment to hand in the application. The first available slot was in April 2022 because of a backlog in applications which he was told was due to delays related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It will take a year and half or even three just to process my application," he said. "This is the second time that I am ready to meet all their criteria but I am being pushed off."

Mohammad Adam arrived in Germany in October 2015 and has been living for more than six years in Erfurt in the state of Thuringia, where he works with a refugee rights organization. His German is impeccable. He was ignored by the local immigration office when he tried to find out why he and other refugees who secured residency permits were only being issued stickers instead of IDs as required. Then he was told it was "an internal decision" without any further explanation.

And then when most refugee residency permits expired in August 2021 as was scheduled the Erfurt immigration office issued everyone "temporary extensions" claiming "lack of personnel" to process renewal applications, according to Mr. Adam.

"Nobody accepts temporary extensions, you can't find work, rent a house or a get a phone line with this paper," said Mr. Adam.

"Many people were traumatized by this fearing they could be deported for not having proper papers."

Separately, Mr. Adam's brother has met all the requirements to bring his wife and children to Germany but his application which has to be made through the same Erfurt immigration office has been pending for more than three years.

Like Mr. Adam, Yara Mayassah has been living and working in Erfurt for more than six years and also speaks fluent German. She tried to apply for citizenship but was told that she had to come for a consultation with the first available slot in July 2022.

Her application to bring her sister to Germany was rejected because it was missing a document which Ms. Mayassah said "does not even exist in Syria."

"My whole life is on hold because of this organization (Ausländerbehörde)," she said.

Iman Jamous, a native of rural Damascus who studied law in Germany and works with a legal aid organization in Erfurt assisting victims of racism, said she had a chance to meet with the mayor of Erfurt and the head of the local immigration office.

"I told them 'it's not as if we just arrived, we have been here since 2015, why did not you foresee that our residency permits will need to be renewed,'" said Ms. Jamous.

She's also trying to apply for citizenship but the first available slot for consultation is late 2022.

"They have two people working on thousands of applications; compared with other states, I feel they do not want people to get citizenship," said Ms. Jamous.

Language and Integration Courses

In an effort not to repeat mistakes made during previous waves of immigration and avoid the creation of what Germans call "parallel societies," most Syrians who were granted asylum or subsidiary protection were required like other refugees to take German language and so-called integration courses that taught them about the history, politics, culture and social norms of the country. It's a prerequisite for receiving social welfare benefits including

housing assistance on which nearly two-thirds of Syrians are dependent in one form or another. It's also a must for getting a job and pursuing higher education and vocational training. The BAMF bears all or most of the cost of these courses.

Some Syrians believe they should not be required to take the courses since most of them are considered refugees in accordance to the 1951 Geneva Convention and will eventually return to their homeland when the situation permits. Apart from those who hold this view the majority of Syrians want to stay in Germany and see the courses as beneficial, even a necessity. Many though have a problem with the way these courses were taught and their applicability to real life— a view shared by teachers as well as Germans who have observed these courses.

Sally Masalmeh, an anti-regime activist from the southern Syrian province of Daraa, was in her in mid 20s when she arrived in Germany with her husband in the fall of 2015. They settled on the Baltic Sea island of Rügen and then in nearby Stralsund. She attained the C1 level of fluency and was about to start studying IT at the University of Stralsund while working part time with a company in the healthcare sector but then had to put everything on hold when she became pregnant with her first daughter.

She feels she's beginning to forget what she learned. She yearns for more meaningful and sustained contact with Germans to practice her language but she and her husband find it hard to build those social connections.

"I feel the German we studied is academic and quite different from the one spoken in society, there are so many expressions that I hear that are alien to me," said Ms. Masalmeh.

Zaidoun al-Zoabi, who is also originally from Daraa, says he speaks a Berlin "street dialect" and knows that he makes a lot of grammar mistakes but this has somehow made it easier for him to connect to Germans.

"Language needs to be more practical than theoretical, grammar classes are useless, the teaching needs to be more hands-on," said Dr. Al-Zoabi. "Germany excelled in processing refugees but the problems emerged in what came after."

Manuela Zahradnik has taught language and integration courses since 2013 in the states of Brandenburg and Saxony. She believes they are a good idea but says there's a lack of qualified instructors. This shortage was particularly acute when the number of those enrolled in these classes soared in 2016.

"It was too fast and too much, it's also hard for people to concentrate when we bombard them with information; it's all theoretical in class and they have few chances to interact with Germans and learn firsthand," said Ms. Zahradnik.

The other problem according to Ms. Zahradnik was the decision to put people from all age groups and educational backgrounds together in the same classes: everyone from those with no formal education or even basic Arabic literacy to those with advanced graduate and professional degrees.

Ms. Zahradnik said many of her Syrian students had to work to support family members who were still in Syria which meant that they were often missing classes.

"Many were stuck in A2 German courses for three semesters," she said.

Aghar al-Jadeed, a native of Homs who arrived in Germany in 2013 and now works as a psychotherapist with refugees, estimates that the conventional class-based way of teaching German probably has not worked with at least 50 percent of Syrians.

Kristin Helberg, a Berlin-based journalist and researcher specializing in Syria, says many young Syrians mastered the language but in almost all cases it can be attributed to a combination of courses and real-life connections with Germans.

"The faster there was a connection between arriving Syrians and Germans, the better the outcome was for Syrians," she said.

Sally Masalmeh, an anti-regime activist from the southern Syrian province of Daraa, was in her in mid 20s when she arrived in Germany with her husband in the fall of 2015. They settled on the Baltic Sea island of Rügen and then in nearby Stralsund. She attained the C1 level of fluency and was about to start studying IT at the University of Stralsund while working part time with a company in the healthcare sector but then had to put everything on hold when she became pregnant with her first daughter.

Children's Education

All Syrian refugee children from the age of six were enrolled in public schools with most initially attending special language and culture courses before integration into regular classes. Trajectories and outcomes have varied widely since each state in Germany runs its own public education system. There are Syrian children who went on to obtain the highest marks on the Abitur, an advanced college placement exam, and there are those who were stuck in transition classes for a long time.

For example, the situation is dire in some public schools in parts of Brandenburg state where Syrians have generally faced greater difficulties in being accepted by local residents.

Aghar al-Jadeed, the psychotherapist, has worked with refugee children and teenagers aged 10 to 18 in public schools in Cottbus, Neuruppin and Potsdam among others.

In one school in Cottbus children were bullied and ostracized by both teachers and other students and many teenage children felt they had no future, according to Mr. al-Jadeed.

"These are poor and marginalized areas and locals are really frustrated and they take it out on refugees," he said.

In Dresden—the capital of Saxony where nearly 15 percent of the population is from an immigrant background[80] and which has seen a backlash against immigrants and refugees in recent years—local legislation created the position of teacher's assistant in public schools to act as intermediary between German teachers and refugee children who face difficulties as well as parents who do not speak German.

There are about 60 of them in the Dresden school system and one of them is Lara Arabi, who came to Germany from Jordan in 2013 with her two sons and was later joined by her husband Salem, a defected Syrian Army officer.

Ms. Arabi is often in class helping smooth interactions between teachers and refugee students who feel anxious about themselves and their performance. She feels Syrians are hypersensitive to the slightest remark or act that may cause them discomfort and often interpret it as discrimination or racism directed at them. At the same time, she feels many German teachers have preconceived notions and prejudgments about Syria and Syrians which often get in the way of establishing healthy connections with students.

One recurring source of trouble is the tension between the traditions and beliefs transmitted by parents to their children at home and what's expected of them in the context of a German public school, according to Ms. Arabi.

For example, one Muslim Syrian father was upset his son was eating at the school cafeteria even though the child was only consuming vegetarian dishes. Another father was angry that his 8-year-old daughter had to change in the school locker room with other girls for her gym class and also told to wear a hijab without pins.

Jamshid, a Syrian-Kurd who moved to Berlin in 2013 and obtained a master's degree in sociology and now works as an emotional support coach in Berlin public schools, says the first question many children of immigrant and refugee backgrounds ask him is "what is your religion?"

"Some parents tell their children Germans are different, they are not like us and they are 'infidels', they make the children afraid of Germans," he said. "This is ingrained in children at an early age and it's not healthy, some of them are born here and they are being told from the start that this country is not for them."

In the country's most populous state North Rhine-Westphalia, which has large concentrations of immigrants of Arab and Muslim backgrounds including Syrians, many parents say it's possible to strike a balance between their desire to see their children remain attached to their religious beliefs and traditions and also progress in German society.

Samer, a native of Homs city, and his wife and five children came to Germany from Lebanon in 2019 through a refugee resettlement program. They now live in Mülheim an der Ruhr, between Duisburg and Essen, where all his children aged eight to 18 attend German public schools. On the weekends they take Arabic and Koran lessons at a nearby mosque.

"The first year the children were in special classes to learn German and the second year they divided their time between special and regular classes," said Samer. "Everything is organized and progressing and we have our rights and we can raise our kids on the values that we desire."

Lara Arabi and her husband Salem Alsaad have achieved so much since they came to Germany in 2013-2014 with their two sons. They immersed themselves in German culture and language and did all sorts of jobs in the beginning just to survive: the couple worked in a factory packaging the traditional German Stollen bread baked at Christmas, Salem worked in a cigarette factory and Lara taught Arabic.

80 Landeshauptstadt Dresden, "Migration and Integration in Dresden", www.dresden.de, April 12, 2022.

Work, Vocational Training & Higher Education

One of the greatest challenges that Syrians face in Germany is finding work and pursuing careers in their field of choosing without having to settle for any job just to be able to survive in Germany and send money to relatives stuck in Syria or in third countries like Lebanon and Turkey. These pressures push some people to work illegally or "in the black" as Syrians say.

As for Syrian professionals, it's often either impossible or extremely complicated and expensive to have degrees earned in Syria recognized in Germany. Physicians and healthcare workers have a better chance because there's a need for their services but even they must surmount formidable bureaucratic hurdles. About 5,000 Syrian doctors are now working in all of Germany making them the largest group among foreign physicians[81].

There are further obstacles in almost all fields for women who wear the Islamic veil.

In addition to language proficiency requirements, most Syrians who wish to enter the German job market find it imperative to undergo vocational training (Ausbildung). This training which is a combination of classroom work and a paid apprenticeship can take two to three years. This has been the most plausible path for many Syrians.

Then there are those who arrived to Germany in their late teens or 20s and who have decided to go further and enroll in German universities to either finish studies they have already begun in Syria or to start over in new fields. This is on top of those who finished or in the process of finishing their secondary education in Germany and also wish to pursue higher education.

Between 2015 and 2019 the Federal Ministry of Education and Research allocated 100 million euros to support German higher education institutions that have launched programs to help refugees who have completed secondary education outside Germany integrate into German universities[82]. Two-thirds of the estimated 7,000 refugees who participated in preparatory language and specialized courses called Integra in 2016 were Syrians, according to the German Academic Exchange Service[83]. Syrians like other refugees with residency permits in Germany are also entitled to grants and interest free loans through the Federal Training Assistance Act (known by its German acronym BAföG).

Muatasim Ka'akeh and his wife and three children arrived in Germany in the summer of 2015 after a grueling sea and land journey that included detention in Hungary. They were granted asylum and settled in the city of Stralsund where he opened a restaurant in the summer of 2020 specializing in grilled meat and the dishes of his native Aleppo.

Besides age, socioeconomic background and educational level, one of the other key determinants of what path Syrians pursue is related to the fact many of them have to rely on social welfare benefits which are contingent on them working or actively looking for work.

"The caseworker begins to send you work offers the moment your German improves, they do not want you to be a burden on the system for long," said a Syrian living and working in Berlin, who preferred to remain anonymous, referring to the so-called Hartz IV benefits that Syrians (like everyone who is unemployed in Germany) receive from the Jobcenter. "The system is impatient and it's not geared for those who want to pursue higher education."

Nearly 65 percent of Syrians still rely entirely or partially on these benefits, according to figures released by the Federal Employment Agency in the summer of 2021[84].

Muatasim Ka'akeh and his wife and three children arrived in Germany in the summer of 2015 after a grueling sea and land journey that included detention in Hungary. They had lost everything in their native Aleppo including Mr. Ka'akeh's dairy and cheese plant.

They were granted asylum and settled in the city of Stralsund in the northeastern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. In the first few years the family relied on social welfare benefits as they learned the language and got used to their new life in Germany. Mr. Ka'akeh who is in his 40s thought about restarting his dairy and cheese business in Stralsund but quickly realized that this required a big investment.

Instead he opened a restaurant in the summer of 2020 specializing in grilled meat and the dishes of his native Aleppo, known as the Levant's culinary capital. His wife Shammaa is a partner in the business. He handles the grill and she's in charge of the kitchen while their children help out on their time off from school and studying.

"I feel empowered that I work and that I'm my own master and no longer dependent on social welfare benefits," says Mr. Ka'akeh.

His restaurant has been a success with Germans who account for more than 90 percent of his customers. He and his wife were featured in the region's main daily newspaper.

81 Rakan Saadoun, Eva-Maria Risse, Leen Sadoun, Yusuf Surucu, Ranim Bittar, Mhd Anas Heshma & Theresa Obermueller, "The Pathways to Residency in Germany: A Survey Study to Identify Factors that Impact an International Medical Graduate from Syria", BMC Medical Education, July 1, 2022.
82 German Academic Exchange Service, "The Integration of Refugees at German Higher Education Institutions: Findings from Higher Education Programmes for Refugees", November 2017.
83 Ibid.
84 Marion MacGregor, "Germany: Two-Thirds of Syrian Refugees Unable to Support Themselves", Info Migrants, July 14, 2021.

Mr. Ka'akeh is grateful for all the opportunities Germany has given him but is sometimes overwhelmed by the bureaucracy as a small business owner. He also wishes there's more acceptance of him and his family as people who work hard and make every effort to abide by the rules of their newly adopted country but still want to preserve their Syrian traditions and Islamic beliefs. He says he feels demeaned and looked upon with suspicion every time he has to interact with the local immigration office (Ausländerbehörde) for a matter relating to the family's residency permits.

Although Stralsund and the surrounding scenic and rural region has seen an influx of young and more open-minded Germans because of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, the area remains a stronghold for those opposed to immigrants and refugees. In the 2021 elections AfD anti-immigrant billboards and posters were plastered all over Stralsund. Mr. Ka'akeh's son Uday is in 10th grade at a German public school and still has to contend with ridicule from teachers and students and remarks like "go back to your country." The 16-year-old tries to remain focused on his goal of going to university for medical studies. Being in the school's wrestling team and winning a regional championship has helped him cope.

Mr. Ka'akeh's wife Shammaa like most veiled Syrian women has to put up with stares on the streets. And although the incidents of verbal and sometimes physical assault have declined, most veiled women in the region find it extremely hard to get work.

During busy times there are four others working in the kitchen besides Mrs. Ka'akeh, all are veiled Syrian women who have been unable to get jobs elsewhere.

"I have a hard time getting work because I wear the hijab and there's a new rule now: a business owner has the right to reject veiled women," said Sally Masalmeh, the Daraa native also living in Stralsund. "The law is on their side."

In July 2021 the Court of Justice of the European Union said employers can limit workplace expression of religious, political or philosophical beliefs when there's a "genuine need" to present "neutrality[85]."

Syrian restaurant in Essen, which along with other major cities in the North Rhine-Westphalia state has seen a large influx of refugees in recent years including Syrians.

Ruba Mohammed, a native of Damascus, fled to Germany in 2015 with her husband and son. They settled in Oberhausen in the northwestern state of North Rhine-Westphalia. She has degrees in trade and business and worked as a warehouse manager in a large pharmaceutical company in Damascus. The veiled 33-year-old was able to get her degrees recognized in Germany but could not find a job in her field. She was told that to increase her chances of finding a job she could do Ausbildung (vocational training/apprenticeship) and Weiterbildung (further education) which in total would take 4 to 5 years. She decided instead to accept a position as warehouse manager with a Syrian-owned food distribution company based in nearby Essen.

May and Yousif Bash, also natives of Damascus, came to Germany in 2014 from Egypt. They settled in the city of Chemnitz in the eastern state of Saxony. Initially they thought they could continue their studies in music which they had started in Syria. Then their lives took a different turn when they were joined by May's parents and sister in 2015. The entire family was enrolled in German language and integration courses. May and Yousif worked with the local church-run community center for two years helping newly arrived refugees. May ended up going to university to get a degree in finance and now works as a financial consultant with a local bank. Yousif is a vocational trainer. The couple have also formed their own musical band and have performed at events hosted by the local government and political parties.

May's sister Maya completed vocational training in office management and worked with the municipality and then she joined the local police force in charge of enforcing city ordinances and keeping the public peace. Her mother Maha, who ran a kindergarten in Damascus, worked in a factory making electrical boards and then joined a catering company supplying schools. May's father Ayman, who used to work as director of sales and marketing for a big musical instruments company in Damascus, had to settle for a job as a driver for a funeral house.

"We are trying to do something but it's difficult, maybe things will be easier for the young ones," said Maha. May and Yousif were expecting a baby.

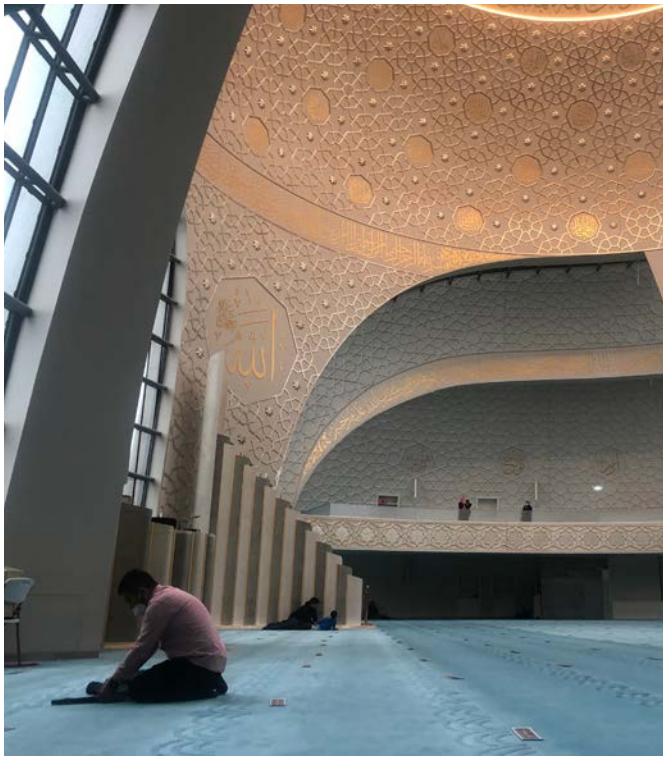
85 Hillary Margolis, "European Union Court OKs Bans on Religious Dress at Work", Human Rights Watch, July 19, 2021.

Many Syrians have found work opportunities in fields related to migrants and refugees with non-governmental organizations and the private sector. There are those who are fulfilled by this work and even see it as an extension of their civic activism in Syria at the start of the uprising in 2011. But there are others who feel this work limits them.

Ghassan, a photojournalist and documentary filmmaker living in Leipzig with his wife and two children, says he's always commissioned to do work about Arabs and refugees in Germany. Most of his pitches for other subjects are rejected.

"You're like the actor who is always cast in the role of the villain," he says.

Aghar al-Jadeed was working as a chef before he came to Germany in 2013. He decided to retrain as a psychotherapist given the tremendous need for his services. He moved from Bremen to Berlin, where he has been working with Arabic-speaking migrants and refugees since 2016. There's a big shortage of multilingual therapists like him.



Cologne Central Mosque in the district of Ehrenfeld, which was inaugurated by Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was mired in controversy during its construction. At the time some residents and officials said that they did not want a "Turkish ghetto" in their area. Insuring that Syrians have a better integration path than Turks who have come before them is a challenge for German society.

Health

Everyone in Germany is entitled to primary care including refugees whose asylum application is pending. The vast majority of Syrians have residency permits and as such they have to join a health insurance plan that covers most of their expenses. Premiums are paid by the Jobcenter or the Social Welfare Office in the case of those still relying on public benefits. Several NGOs offer free translation services to those who have trouble communicating with healthcare providers.

The biggest challenge for most Syrians is mental health treatment. Many are reluctant to seek help because of the stigma associated with that and those that do have few options beyond being prescribed antidepressants. There are very few Arabic-speaking psychotherapists relative to the need.

Aghar al-Jadeed, who works with an NGO providing psychotherapy services to refugees, says in the case of many Syrians it's compounded traumas associated with losing one's home and homeland, making the sea and land journey to Germany and coming to grips with all the requirements of life in Germany. He says some men feel a sense of "worthlessness" and can't get over the loss of their traditional role as the head of the household which often translates to depression and violence toward their wives and children.

"The system here deals with basic needs: housing, food, education and medicine, but largely ignores mental health, they really need to do more," he said.

Authorities began providing mental health services in 2016 at facilities where refugees were housed pending their asylum application but people were largely on their own after they left these facilities.

"Many people felt like they were plunging into the unknown and they did not know what to do next, the language and integration courses should have been accompanied by psychological support," says Muhannad, a 31-year-old native of Aleppo, who came to Germany in 2015 and is now studying psychology at the University of Potsdam.

Geographic Distribution and Living Conditions

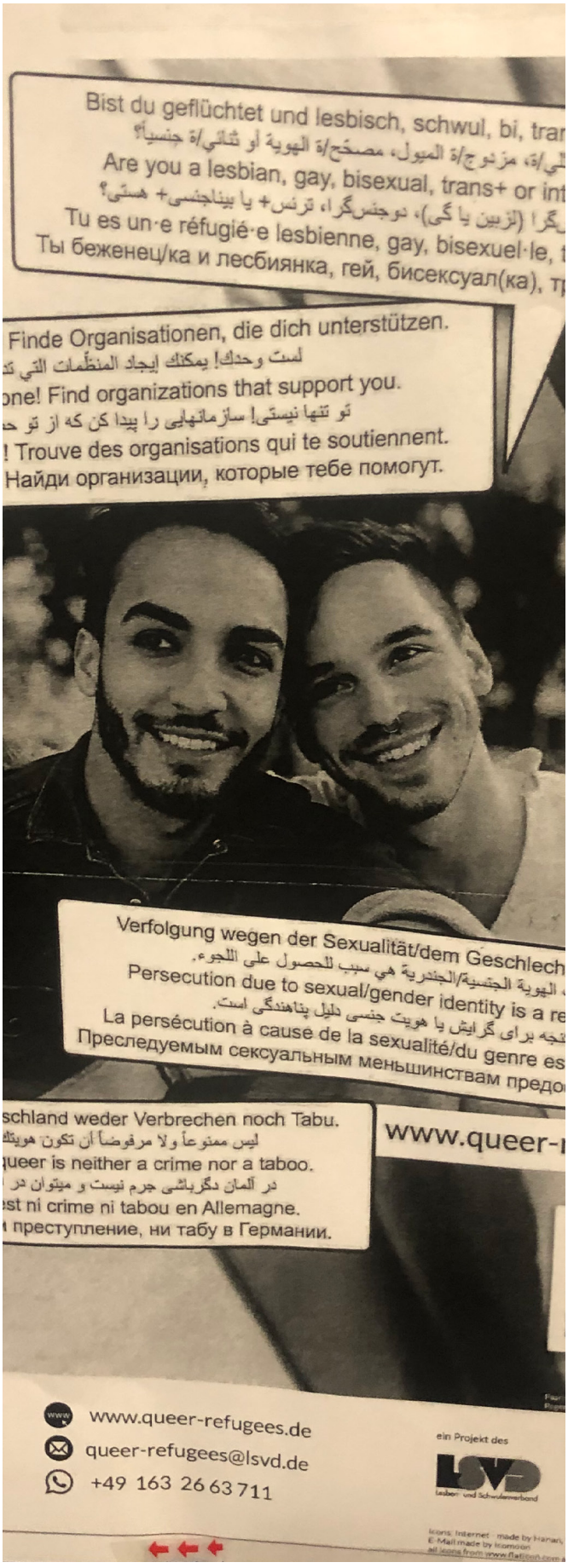
The trajectories of most Syrians have been shaped to a large extent by where they ended up settling in Germany, how they have been received by the communities they moved into and the degree to which they have been able to reconcile their existing social norms with the ones they encountered in their new lives.

Syrian asylum seekers had no say over which reception centers they were sent to pending their application and interview process—allocations were done by a computerized system that was supposed to insure fair distribution among states depending on tax revenue and population.

And in accordance to the Residence Rule of the Residence Act which aims as it says to promote "lasting integration into the way of life in the Federal Republic of Germany," most Syrians had to remain for at least three years in the place where they were granted their first temporary residency permit[86]. The decision to move after that was dictated by factors like the level of one's reliance on public benefits, the ability to secure housing and work, the extent to which people felt welcomed in their first place of residence and the desire to move from rural to urban areas or to be with other family members and friends or in parts of Germany with large concentrations of Syrians.

For example many young and single Syrians who came to Germany from big cities in Syria or had been politically active or involved in creative fields tended to settle in major urban centers, particularly the capital Berlin. The idea of living in a cosmopolitan place however and wherever they wanted appealed to many.

86 Federal Ministry of Justice, "Act on the Residence, Economic Activity and Integration of Foreigners in the Federal Territory, Residence Act", www.gesetze-im-internet.de , February 17, 2020.



A poster in Erfurt to increase awareness among LGBTQ refugees of their rights under German law.

"I feel Berlin is home because I have a big social network, but there are very few Germans in it; my friends are mostly Syrians, Lebanese and Egyptians," says Maria Bassel Chehadeh who came to Germany for work in 2017 but still considers herself a refugee.

Muhannad, the 31-year-old Aleppo native studying psychology, lives in Berlin but his parents are in nearby Brandenburg state.

"I do not feel one bit like a stranger in the city but the moment I step into the train to visit my parents in Brandenburg I feel like the Ausländer (foreigner)," he said.

Zaidoun Al-Zoabi, who came to Berlin for his post-doctoral studies and ended up seeking asylum, lives with his wife and three daughters in a neighborhood on the southwest side of the capital. Their neighbors are mostly German but they interact with people from all over the world.

On the other hand he knows many people from his native Daraa who have chosen to settle in an area commonly referred to as Nahariya located south of the city on the border with Brandenburg state.

"You feel like you're in Daraa al-Balad, the mansaf (dish of cooked lamb on a large tray of rice), the Arabic floor seating and the arguileh (hookah)," says Dr. Al-Zoabi. "People are doing everything to keep to themselves and protect their customs and traditions."

This desire to protect one's identity has spurred many Syrians to move to towns and cities in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia where there is already a large population of immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa.

Ahmed Remou, a 29-year-old native of the Aleppo countryside, arrived in Germany from Greece in 2014. He requested asylum when he reached the city of Aachen in western Germany on the border with Belgium. He was then sent to a town in eastern Germany but shortly after obtaining his residency permit he decided to move back west and settled in Mülheim an der Ruhr, where some of his friends were already living.

Mr. Remou married a German woman who had converted to Islam and they had a daughter together but then separated. He opened his own business in Mülheim and brought his parents over from Syria. He likes the fact that the Syrian community is growing and that his daughter is able to attend German public school and also study Arabic and the Koran at the local Islamic center. He's also happy that she's in a milieu that will be more accepting of her wearing the hijab when she gets older.

While Syrians definitely do face a harder time in many parts of eastern Germany where anti-immigrant sentiments remain high, many are opting to stay in these areas despite the challenges.

A native of the Yarmouk camp in Damascus who arrived in Germany with his wife and three children in 2015 was initially settled in Munich but then moved to the city of Chemnitz in the eastern state of Saxony. He has stayed there despite several anti-immigrant incidents in the city including violent protests organized by the far right in 2018 during which immigrants were attacked on the streets.

He has opened his own business in the city in 2019 and says Syrians and other immigrants are contributing to the revival of the city, which like other former industrial centers in the east suffered economic decline after reunification—at least 15 doctors at a new hospital in the city are Syrian refugees.

There's a similar determination to persevere by the Syrians who were settled in Thuringia, another state in former Eastern Germany where anti-immigrant sentiments remain high.

Nujoud, a native of Aleppo, arrived in Germany in 2015 with her husband and son who was 12 at the time. They settled in Thuringia's capital Erfurt.

She had only finished the equivalent of 9th grade in Syria. She worked hard to reach the B2 level of German language fluency and completed vocational training as an assisted living provider for the elderly. She was rejected eight times for an apprenticeship that's required for her to receive certification. The ninth place accepted her. She wears a veil and regularly faces harassment and verbal assault.

Her German neighbors hardly ever respond or acknowledge her when she greets them. People get up when she sits next to them on public transportation and in 2021 she was waiting for her husband in Erfurt's central square when an elderly German woman approached her and told her in her face: "I hate you."

Nujoud smiled and responded: "Why what did I do to you?"

The woman answered: "You did nothing to me but I still hate you."

Nujoud said with a smile before walking away with her husband: "I do not have a problem with you and you may hate me but I actually do not hate you back."

Nujoud says she does not plan to leave Erfurt and aspires to work, finish her studies and become a German citizen one day. She finds strength in the solidarity of other Syrian and immigrant women and the encouragement and praise she has gotten from some Germans.

She was among those who protested in April 2021 in the center of Erfurt against a racist attack by a German man on a 17-year-old Syrian in one of the city's trams[87].

Family & Gender Dynamics

One of the most profound impacts of the Syrian migration to Germany has been on the social dynamics within Syrian families, especially as it relates to a women's rights, the relationship between parents and children and individual choice.

Joumana Seif, a lawyer and daughter of a prominent Syrian opposition leader who came to Germany at the end of 2013 and currently works at the Berlin-based European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, says many Syrian women arriving in Germany quickly realized they were not compelled to tolerate unhappy and even abusive marriages and that they had other options.

"Divorce is a stigma in Syria, women will be ostracized by society and their own families and they have no financial security and can't live alone, so as a result they will put up with a lot because there are no alternatives," says Ms. Seif, who is active in women's rights and has cofounded the Syrian Women's Network and the Syrian Women Political Movement.

"All of this changed in Germany, women realized they are free human beings and that they have their rights and own spaces," added Ms. Seif.

While there are many Syrian men who have been supportive and accommodating of their wives in Germany, there are many others who have found it very hard to adjust to having to start from scratch in a new country and to lose their status as the head of the household. Some are even jealous of the progress made by their wives in learning the language and integrating into the job market.

This has led to a sharp rise in divorce among Syrians, according to Ms. Seif. A few situations have had tragic deadly outcomes with men killing their wives or daughters in order to "cleanse their honor."

Several NGOs receive financial support from the government both on the federal and local levels to work on programs and initiatives specifically targeted at protecting immigrant women.

Keefah al-Deeb, a Syrian painter, writer and political and civil society activist who settled in Berlin at the end of 2013, has held several workshops to increase awareness among Syrian women about their options and rights under the law in the case of violent and abusive family situations.

87 Associated Press, "German Held After Racist Attack on Syrian Caught on Video", www.apnews.com , April 26, 2021.

Moudy al-Chami, a 32-year-old native of Damascus, was subjected to a torrent of verbal abuse and criticism when he announced on social media that he was gay and also enjoyed performing in drag shortly after he was granted asylum in Germany and settled in Berlin in 2016.

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She says daughters in some conservative families are also vulnerable to pressure from their parents and male siblings to not pursue their studies or work and to agree to arranged marriages. She's aware of several examples where resistance by daughters to these pressures has subjected them to violence.

There are also situations where young Syrian adults are sometimes stigmatized by their families or by other Syrians and on social media for the choices they make in their new lives in Germany. This includes a decision to take off the veil, live with a partner outside of marriage or announce a non-heteronormative sexual identity.

Moudy al-Chami, a 32-year-old native of Damascus, was subjected to a torrent of verbal abuse and criticism when he announced on social media that he was gay and also enjoyed performing in drag shortly after he was granted asylum in Germany and settled in Berlin in 2016.

His parents who had remained in Damascus told him to "tone it down because people were talking," and many Syrians in Germany reproached him for "besmirching their reputation" and focusing on "trivial matters" at a time when "the suffering Syrian people" had other more urgent priorities than sexual liberation.

"Asylum is not just for those fleeing war, but also for those that want their rights and do not feel safe in their home country because of their sexual identity," said Mr. al-Chami, who is also known as Houriyet Berlin (Berlin Mermaid) in his drag persona.

"What good is political change if my society sees me as a criminal," added Mr. al-Chami.

Mr. al-Chami is a successful DJ and performer in Berlin and has been embraced by many Syrians, Arabs and Muslims both in Germany and elsewhere who have no problem with his choices. He has also tried to establish a network to help queer Syrian immigrants in Germany cope with the pressures of coming out.

Rahim Darwish, a Syrian who lives in the western German city of Duisburg and organizes theater performances and workshops for immigrant and refugee children in the Rhine-Ruhr region, says one of the biggest problems is a growing communication gap between Syrians who came to Germany as children and their parents.

The children are immersed in German language and culture at school and around their friends but their parents who may not be as fluent in German insist their children adhere to Syrian social norms.

"Often times there's no trust between parents and their children, there's no conversation and no give and take," says Mr. Darwish.

Relations with Germans & Other Immigrants

When 1.1 million asylum seekers, more than half of them Syrian, arrived in Germany in 2015 they were welcomed by many Germans. Private citizens as well as all sorts of civil society organizations and groups pitched in to help Syrians and others.

Many Syrians and Germans say the shift in the welcoming mood happened at the start of 2016 when immigrants and recent arrivals were linked to sexual assault incidents on New Year's eve in Cologne, Hamburg and other cities[88]. This spawned an unprecedented amount of fake news, rumors and sensational media reports that fueled public fear and resentment toward immigrants and refugees. All of this was exploited by far-right and anti-immigrant groups for political gains. Even though no Syrians were ever convicted in these incidents, what happened has continued to color the perception of Syrians by many Germans.

In 2019 Omar Mohammad, a native of Aleppo who came to Germany in 2015 and settled in the Rhine-Ruhr region, was finishing his vocational training in events management. Part of the training involved a field trip to a concert venue that had hosted 10,000 people.

During the course of his presentation one of the organizers said "yes there are many dangerous Syrians living in our area but do not worry our security team is prepared," according to Mr. Mohammad.

"I did not sleep for two nights, I wish I said something, I wish my teacher said something," said Mr. Mohammad. "These prejudgments are dominant, they are overwhelming."

For many Syrians the problem is more fundamental than that and is rooted in the philosophy and approach of Germany's integration programs for immigrants and refugees.

"The whole premise is that you are a bad human being but now we are making you civilized and turning you into a better person," said Ayham Majid-Agha, a Berlin-based playwright and theater director. "Being constantly corrected depresses you."

88 Yermi Brenner and Katrin Ohlendorf, "Time for the Facts: What Do We Know About Cologne Four Months Later?" The Correspondent, May 2, 2016.

Jamshid, a Berlin-based Syrian sociologist who completed his master's thesis on the issue of integration, says the asylum process, the language and integration courses and the Syrians' interactions with local immigration offices (Ausländerbehörde) and the Jobcenter all have an impact on how Syrians see themselves and their relationship with German society.

"You're always made to feel imperfect, not good enough or not trying hard enough; this is systematic and it will have a long-term impact," he said.

Even the word "integration" which dominates all official and public discourse about refugees and immigrants is very problematic for the majority of Syrians.

"The concept is not clear at all, is integration mixing two colors to get a new color? Or is it for the colors to be in harmony with one another, to coexist?" says Yara Mayassah, who arrived in 2015 and settled in Erfurt, the capital of Thuringia state, where she works for an association that seeks to empower migrant women.

"Many Syrians think of integration as losing their identity and melting into German society and as such reject it; I think there should have been a deeper reflection into the term's connotations before deploying it so widely and easily."

Keefah al-Deeb, the Berlin-based Syrian painter and civil society activist, says that for every project aimed at refugees there should have been a corresponding one for German host communities.

For example like Handbook Germany, a multilingual information portal for refugees, asylum seekers and everyone who's new to the country which Ms. Al-Deeb worked on, there should have been a similar portal targeting Germans to explain to them the backgrounds, circumstances and diversity of those seeking refuge in Germany, she says.

"There are two sides to integration, it's a two-way street," she adds. "I can't have a discussion with you comfortably if you do not want to speak with me in the first place."

Some Syrians also feel there are unrealistic expectations and goals in Germany's approach to integration.

"You can't say refugees are welcome and not expect this, you will get the lawyer, doctor, farmer and thief plus people who are traumatized and there are people who won't make it," said a Berlin-based Syrian journalist who requested anonymity.

Tarek Aziza, a Leipzig-based Syrian author who is involved in several initiatives and projects intended to foster better communication and understanding between Syrians and Germans, says the system saddled refugees with too much right away.

"During the welcoming phase people tried to create common spaces through food, music, theater, etc. but did not go further in building bridges," he said.

Hiba and Wissam, natives of Damascus who arrived in Germany in 2015, formed with another friend the Syrian Collective in Düsseldorf in an effort to strengthen ties among Syrians in Germany and also to create what they call a Syrian-German dialogue.

"We want there to be a discussion with us on the same level, speak with us, not about us," says Wissam.

"In media and politics we hear about the Syrians, the Syrians, the Syrians…they talk about us but we are not included in this dialogue and we are not sitting at the table."

Hiba adds: "We only see their stereotypes of us."

Both admit that their efforts to have "real dialogue" with Germans have failed so far because they say there's either a lack of interest on the German side or often times preset formulas for how things should be done and represented to fit the requirements of certain publicly-funded programs.

Zaidoun Al-Zoabi says what's required are more intensive programs and initiatives that seek to foster more shared values between Germans and Syrians. He says the majority of Syrians in Germany are "traditional and conservative" and the "secular-minded" who live in urban centers like Berlin and have "adopted liberal values" are the minority.

He and the Leipzig-based Mr. Aziza believe Syrians who understand the "nuances" on both the German and Syrian sides are best equipped to help bridge the gaps.

"We are now at a stage where we have to live together but we can't seem to find common ground to build on, things are still unclear and no effort is being made in that direction by both sides," says Duisburg-based Rahim Darwish. "I see a parallel society already taking shape."

Mr. Darwish says he shares a big house with eight Germans.

"Many of my Arab friends keep telling me 'how can you live with them' or 'you will lose your religion,'" he says.

Mr. Majid-Agha poses with some members of his team working on the pigeon theater project at the site of the UFA studios in Berlin's Tempelhof district.

Aziza at a workshop in Erfurt to increase awareness among Syrian refugees of their rights under Germany's laws and political system.

The Berlin-based journalist and researcher Kristin Helberg, who is married to a Syrian and lived and worked in Syria for many years, believes the focus has to be on three areas:

• Syrians have to be able to become more politically active and visible in order to advocate for their causes both inside Germany and when it comes to German policies concerning them abroad.

• Germans need to better understand what Syrians went through and continue to go through.

• Syrians need to feel part of society on every level and better understand how Germany's social system works.

Others believe one overlooked problem is the tension between Syrians and other migrant groups like the Lebanese and Turks who harbor a certain resentment toward Syrians.

These earlier migrant groups feel Syrians have been given far more support than what they received when they first came to Germany.

"The Lebanese are also angry that Syrians have muscled in on their livelihood like for example the business of Middle Eastern food restaurants," said a Lebanese-German resident of Berlin.

Political Dimension

Politics and political participation will play a central role in shaping Syrians' lives in Germany in the coming years. As more Syrians become citizens and voters, how will they participate and who will represent their interests in a political system and society that still largely sees their presence as somewhat temporary? There's no clear answer yet to this question.

"It will take time to transition from a migrant/refugee society to a diaspora but we must begin helping communities prepare their future leaders," says Hozan Ibrahim, executive director of IMPACT – Civil Society Development and Research, a Berlin-based NGO formed in 2013 to empower civil society actors and promote good governance in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and among immigrant communities throughout Europe.

IMPACT launched a program called "MPs 2030" to provide 6-month political training to recent immigrants between the age of 18 and 30 with the support of Germany's Federal Agency for Civic Education and the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

There have been complications due to the COVID-19 pandemic but 20 people took part in the first round of training, half of them were Syrians, according to Mr. Ibrahim. The second round had 40 participants with a similar number of Syrians, he said.

But programs like this remain rare and very much in the early stages and despite promising signs like the election to the Bundestag in 2021 of two lawmakers whose parents were born in Syria, the experiences of many Syrians with both national and participatory local politics have been problematic so far.

Tarek Alaows, who arrived in Germany in 2015, was nominated in 2021 as a Bundestag candidate for the Green Party in Oberhausen in North Rhine-Westphalia but he withdrew shortly after because of what he described as "massive experiences of racism" and threats against him and those close to him[89].

In nearby Mülheim an der Ruhr, Omar Mohammad works as an events manager and is active in local cultural and social affairs. He's also one of 24 members (16 chosen by the community and the rest appointed by the city) of a so-called Council of Integration created by the local government to provide refugees with a platform to air their concerns and advocate for programs important to them. He says the council is largely symbolic, plus many refugees, particularly those still on residency permits in Germany, are afraid their legal status in Germany could be jeopardized if they are too outspoken—fears they hold from years of living under authoritarian regimes.

"They (German authorities) need to intensify empowerment programs for foreigners to know their rights and obligations and to defend themselves," said Mr. Mohammad.

89 Dave Braneck, "How Racist Abuse Halted a Syrian Refugee's Run for Seat in the Bundestag", Euronews, July 8, 2021.

In states like Thuringia, where Syrians and other immigrants face a lot more challenges being accepted, there's a mix of disillusionment and determination not to give up among civil society activists.

Mohammad Adam resigned from the Erfurt Ausländerbeirat, an advisory council for refugees and immigrants, because he felt it was "just symbolic with no real power to implement any of its decisions."

"Six years I am living in this city and I can't take part in political life or choose the mayor," he added.

But Mr. Adam and others like him are not giving up and are looking for other avenues to express themselves politically and to be heard including protest and taking part in grassroots initiatives.

Iman Jamous, the activist who is working with a legal aid organization in Erfurt assisting victims of racism, says she can't wait to become a German citizen.

"I dream to have the passport and vote in this state in the next elections," she said. "I live here and pay taxes here and as such have the right to decide my fate."

But for some Syrians, even those that became citizens, things are not so straightforward as they remain conflicted between a certain commitment they still have to political change in Syria and their new lives in Germany.

"All my work has been with Europe and Syria, so in a way I feel like I am on the margin of German society, I definitely feel more of a Berliner and European than a German," says IMPACT's Mr. Ibrahim, who became a German citizen in 2020.

Mr. Ibrahim's wife Maria al-Abdeh, a women's rights and political activist, was born in France but then lived in Syria. Their children were born in Germany. At home they speak Arabic, French, German and Kurdish.

Kristin Helberg, the Berlin-based journalist and author, says it's important to keep in mind that Syrians in Germany are not a monolith, they come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and have conflicting political views and convictions. For example, while the majority are against the Syrian regime and oppose Germany having any contact with the regime, there are some Syrians in Germany that actually support the regime and are pushing for normalization of ties with it. There are divisions on a whole host of other thorny issues like Turkey's role in Syria and what degree of autonomy should be granted to Syria's Kurdish population.

Ms. Helberg said groups like the Berlin-based Union of Syrian German Associations (VDHS), which was formed before 2011 and receives support from several German government ministries and agencies, have tried to launch a dialogue among Syrians in Germany about these political issues but have not made a lot of progress.

"There are some things you just can't overcome: the conflict is still ongoing and people are still thinking of the fate of their loved ones back home," she said.

There are naturally political, societal and geographic divisions within Germany over the future of Syrians in the country.
The current governing coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals outlined in its Coalition Contract (a roadmap for its four-year mandate) last year the steps it would take to accelerate and inject more fairness, certainty and transparency in the asylum process. It also promised to widen the scope of family reunification, provide better targeted language courses and ease access to healthcare and psychological support[90].

The new government also said it would allow dual citizenship and accelerate the German citizenship process by allowing applications after five years of permanent residency and even three years in the case of "special integration achievements[91]."

Many Syrians have welcomed these pledges but they are also aware that much depends on the governments of the states where they reside which have varying political dynamics and stances on a whole range of issues affecting Syrians and their future in Germany. The AfD and anti-immigration movements like Pegida remain strong in several eastern states of the country.

These local disparities are acknowledged by the new coalition government, it mentions in its political roadmap that family reunification for Syrians and other refugees will depend on the "capacities of society" and that "not everyone coming to Germany can stay." It also speaks of a "deportation offensive" particularly targeting those who have committed crimes or pose a threat to society.

Although Germany has not deported anyone since it let the ban on deportation of Syrians expire at the end of 2020, there's much uncertainty about this issue particularly when viewed in a European context with member states having varying positions on the matter. There's also some divergence among European states on the extent of their contacts with the Syrian regime.

Election poster of the Alternative for Germany, 2018. Inscription: "Islam doesn't belong to Germany", "Freedom of the woman is not negotiable!". Wikimedia commons / Rosenkohl.

90 Economist Intelligence, "Breaking Down the German Coalition Agreement", www.EIU.com, December 1 2021.
91 Ibid.

Hiba, a native of Damascus who arrived in Germany in 2015, formed with another friend the Syrian Collective in Düsseldorf in an effort to strengthen ties among Syrians in Germany and also to create what they call a Syrian-German dialogue.

Bisher Najjar is a popular France-based social media content creator who is also a university professor. He fled Damascus when the conflict erupted in 2011.

Many Syrians in Germany believe the fact the regime remains heavily sanctioned by the EU coupled with the recent conviction in Germany of a former regime officer on crimes against humanity as well as ongoing legal processes against Bashar al-Assad and other members of his regime all mean that Syrians will remain in Germany as long as the regime is in power. Others say things are not so clear cut and that everything in the end is subject to the political mood in Germany.

A German perspective

While Germans remain divided over whether it was a good idea to take in hundreds of thousands of Syrian asylum seekers, many on both sides have yet to come to terms with this reality: Most Syrians won't go back to Syria, many will become German citizens and this is bound to transform Germany and what it means to be German.

A Berlin-based physician who is originally from Bavaria says even though a quarter of Germans have migrant backgrounds there is a certain German identity, more accurately an identity attached to one's region, that remains entrenched in German society and as such makes many Germans feel that the influx of so many Syrians all at once is an assault on this identity.

He says these fears are nothing new. He recalled how many Germans, particularly in the east, reacted when Polish and other Eastern European workers started coming into the country after the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union.

"Polish workers in Frankfurt an der Oder lived in their cars next to the river and did all the dirty work that Germans did not want to do," he said.

But what complicates things in the case of Syrians is a certain narrative which holds sway over a sizable segment of the German population. It goes something like this: Syrians are predominantly Muslim and their backgrounds and traditions are incompatible with those of Germans and that they are a burden on the country's social system and will end up like Turks in what Germans call parallel societies. This narrative ignores the fact that the German state for very long wanted to keep Turks apart but that now it was making significant efforts to bring in and embrace immigrants.

Even among those who say they have no problem with more Syrians becoming citizens and for Germany to turn into "a nation of immigrants," there are a whole list of preconditions that newcomers must fulfill in order to be accepted.

"Here in Berlin I have only three or four friends who are really German, the rest are not," says one Berlin resident in his 30s who is a successful business executive and originally from the northwestern city of Osnabrück.

"My problem is with the people that beat their wives, do not learn the language, commit crimes, send them back, be tough. Why should we protect a person who does not accept our rules, I can't understand this. Also the women who want to stay home and not work and follow Islamic rule, why should we spend money for it."

Some Germans say this presumption that immigrant and refugee communities are somehow backwards and plagued with social problems is largely born out of ignorance.

"Integration has to work from both sides: Germans and Syrians," says Manuela Zahradnik, who has taught language and integration courses since 2013 in the states of Brandenburg and Saxony.

"We need more programs to bring Germans and Syrians together, we need to meet and talk for a long time, most programs are for a couple of months only and there needs to be more mixing, even in Berlin...we need to change the mindset of people toward immigration."

While there's certainly more openness and acceptance among the young and those born after reunification, Konrad, a 22-year-old native of Leipzig studying music at the conservatory in Chemnitz, says hesitancy to embrace or understand those who are different is cross-generational, at least in Saxony where he is.

"People have their opinions and do not want to change, they are set in their own ways and are hesitant to take the first step to be openminded," he said.

Daniella, a resident of Leipzig who was 24 when the Berlin Wall fell, says the appeal of anti-immigrant and far-right movements to many Germans in places like Saxony, including people she once considered friends, is a reflection of unresolved traumas associated with both the pre and post reunification periods.

"There has been no real reconciliation among Germans, trauma is pushing people toward radicalism; embracing anti-immigrant narratives like those put forward by the AfD is a way to externalize the problem," said Daniella, who is active in an initiative that brings Syrians and Germans who lived under the former GDR together to speak about their experiences of living in authoritarian states. "The presence of Syrians may force Germans to confront the past and their own problems."

While there are plenty of challenges many Germans are hopeful about the future with one Berlin resident seeing the influx of Syrians as a catalyst for "a very ambitious social project that could redefine and remake German society and is working its way quietly and surely forward."

Long-term prospects

Syrians have made great strides in adapting to their new lives in Germany within a relatively short time. Lots of Syrians have gone over and beyond of what the asylum and immigration system in Germany has required of them in order to remain in the country. Many Syrians want to become Germans and give back something to the country that stood by them at their darkest hour, it's a journey they are willing to undertake despite the many challenges they still face in being accepted by society.

Many though are still torn between their lives in Germany and the family members left behind in Syria and neighboring countries like Lebanon and Turkey. There are those who want to leave Germany after they finish their education and there are those who want to go back to Syria at some point if the situation permits.

May and Yousif Bash, the Damascus natives who came to Germany in 2014 from Egypt and settled in the city of Chemnitz in the eastern state of Saxony, see their future in Germany. May's parents joined them in 2015 but Yousif's are still in Damascus.

"There's no turning back because there's no Syria," says Yousif referring to the country's destruction, fracturing and uprooting of half of its population by more than a decade of war.

Yousif works as a vocational trainer and May is a financial consultant at a local bank and they are expecting their first child. They speak impeccable German, bought a house in a suburb of Chemnitz and their friends are Germans and non-Germans. They are very active members of their local community and have formed a musical band that performs in public venues in and around Chemnitz, which was named Europe's cultural capital for 2025.

Yet the couple are worried about the future and say they have felt a marked rise in xenophobia in recent years.

"Even if you succeed in Germany it's very hard," says Yousif. "I told a (German) friend that I have an appointment for citizenship but he told me that even if you get citizenship you'll never be German. It shocks me that my son will suffer because his dad is originally from Syria or that my daughter will have to confront someone who will remind her that her parents are Arabs."

May says that the irony is that they are also sometimes rejected by more conservative Syrians around them who do not like the fact that they are secular-minded, drink beer and wear shorts in the summer.

"I feel sometimes like we are stuck in the middle," May says about not being tolerated by some Germans as well as some Syrians for one reason or another.

At the Alsaad household in the Südvorstadt district of Dresden there is also a feeling of being torn between two worlds but for different reasons.

Lara Arabi and her husband Salem Alsaad have achieved so much since they came to Germany in 2013-2014 with their two sons. They immersed themselves in German culture and language and did all sorts of jobs in the beginning just to survive: the couple worked in a factory packaging the traditional German Stollen bread baked at Christmas, Salem worked in a cigarette factory and Lara taught Arabic.

Lara is now a teacher's assistant in a German public school and Salem, a defected army officer in the Syrian army who was completing a PhD in military studies in Russia before he came to Germany, joined a medical equipment company after his vocational training. The couple are active members of their community and do lots of volunteer work to help other refugees and foster better understanding between Germans and refugees. Their eldest son Alaa, who turned 19 in January, is completing an apprenticeship at a local hospital and is contemplating studying medicine or chemistry.

Syrian actress Amal Omran (in red jacket), who fled to Germany at the start of the conflict in Syria, joined Collective Ma'loubah. It was founded in 2017 by a group of Syrian playwrights and actors in Germany and France. It has its residency at the Theater an der Ruhr in the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr. All works are coproduced with the German theater.

His younger brother Aws is in grade 9 at a school renowned for its rigor in math and science. He wants to get into IT. They all became German citizens in 2020.

"Yes we came to Germany and we integrated and tried to build something for our children and to give them safety but however hard we try we can't take from inside us those we left behind in Syria, you can't forget what's happening to people there," said Ms. Arabi as tears streamed down her cheeks. Behind her were photos of her parents and siblings who have remained in her native Suwaida province.

And to the consternation of Lara, Salem is still closely following the political and military situation in Syria and involved in some activities organized by members of the opposition in Germany and other parts of Europe.

"I keep telling him 'are not you tired, have not you lost hope?,'" says Lara.

To that Salem said: "Syrians started deep change in society but this will take time."

Lara thought about visiting Syria in the summer of 2021 to see her family, whom she has not seen since 2013, but then was worried she or her children could be detained by the regime as a way to pressure her husband, a defected officer, to return to Syria and hand himself over.

"We would lose everything we built in Germany," said Lara.

Her son Alaa, who came to Germany when he was 10 years old, says that apart from family back in Syria and some traditions he feels no particular attachment to Syria.

"I am German and I do not tell people I am of Syrian origin unless they ask," says Alaa.

"Germans are really rational about a lot of things, they can control their emotions better than Arabic people and I love that."

Mohamad Alhaj, a native of Aleppo, who arrived in Germany in 2015 at the age of 27, is trying to strike a balance between his Syrian identity and his new life in Germany. He settled in Berlin where he worked hard to attain the C1 level of German language fluency, enroll in university and work part-time as a security guard in a major department store in the capital.

He is finishing his master's degree in political science and has applied for German citizenship. He also got married in 2021. (Mohamad Alhaj became a German citizen in 2022.)

He said all around him he hears Syrians who complain about racism or voice concerns about raising their children in Germany and ponder the possibility of leaving to an Islamic country after obtaining German citizenship.

Samer at the entrance of an association in Mülheim an der Ruhr supporting local refugees.

"Every person has a vision; my vision is not based on these fears and concerns," he said. "We should look forward and not worry about racism and whether Germans are going to accept us, we should focus on bettering ourselves."

Collaboration & Coexistence

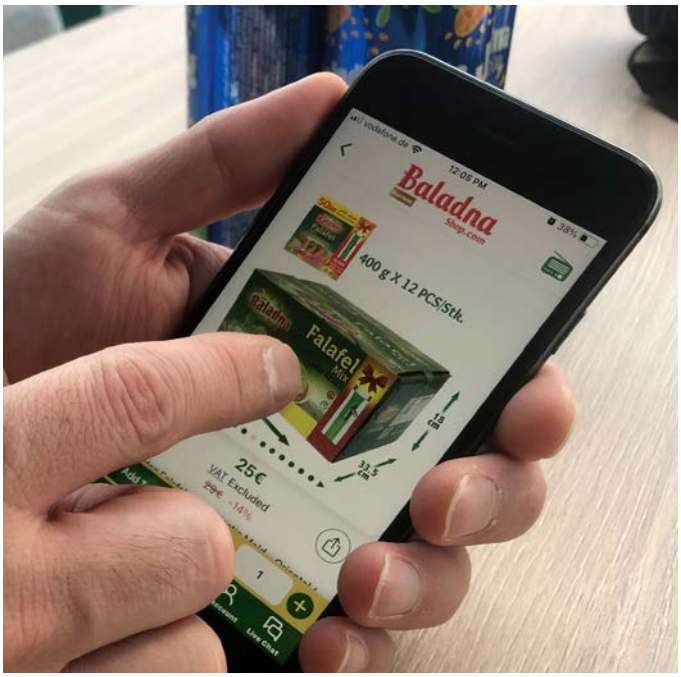
Despite the many difficulties that Syrians still face, they have already made a mark on several aspects of German life including culture, social and political activism and even cuisine. Here are a few examples:

• **Theater** – Theater has been an extremely important platform of self-expression for Syrians and a way to process and narrate what they have been through from growing up in a police state, rebelling against it and then fleeing from in a hard and painful journey into exile. Theater has also been an important vehicle of collaboration between Syrians, Germans and other immigrants in Germany with the Syrian involvement enriching and expanding the German theater repertoire.

One of the many Syrian theater groups that have come into existence after 2015 is Collective Ma'louba. It was founded in 2017 by a group of Syrian playwrights and actors in Germany and France. It has its residency at the Theater an der Ruhr in the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr. All works are coproduced with the German theater. In a performance of a play titled Reine Formsache in October 2021 the actress Amal Omran and actor Mouayad Roumieh examined how is it like to be theater actors living in exile in Germany.

And as time has gone by many Syrians have tried to break new grounds and move away from just doing theater about the refugee experience. For example, Ayham Majid Agha, the former artistic director of the Exile Ensemble at Berlin's Gorki theater, teamed up with art critic and curator Kolja Reichert to construct a pigeon theater on the site of Berlin's famed UFA studios.

• **Adopt A Revolution** – The group was founded in 2011 as a grassroots initiative to help reshape the discourse and public debate in Germany about the Arab Spring. The group then began supporting those inside Syria resisting the regime by peaceful means and doing civil society work in their communities. In 2016-2017 they started doing work in Germany like supporting those Syrians who want to remain politically active in their new lives in Germany, providing a safe space for Syrians to discuss their future and also bringing Syrians and Germans together to find common ground.



Issam Kattan, CEO of one of the main subsidiaries of Baladna, shows the Baladna-App on his cell phone.

One project, launched in reaction to the rise of anti-immigration sentiment in the eastern part of Germany, aims to bring Syrians who lived under the Assad regime with Germans who experienced life under the GDR together to share experiences of living in police states. Although this project is still in the early stages and has been limited so far to small gatherings, many of those involved are determined to press ahead and find better ways to get their message to a wider audience.

"People need to understand the things that bring us together, what we have in common with Syrians," said Daniela Döring, a Leipzig resident and psychotherapist who is actively involved in this project.

• **Baladna –** Abdul-Razak Kattan fled Aleppo in 2011 with only $400 in his pocket. He and his family settled in the Turkish city of Gaziantep where he established Baladna, a company that makes Middle Eastern food staples based on products sourced in Turkey. In 2017 he branched out to Germany where he was joined by his cousin Issam. The company now has a 18,000 square meter compound in the city of Essen from where it distributes more than 400 different products to more than 2000 points of sale throughout Germany and Europe. One of the company's holdings is led by a German executive and a quarter of its management and administration staff is German.

And since many of its food products are vegetarian the company has started to make significant inroads into the huge vegan market in Germany and Europe. Since 2020 it has been selling its products on the website of the German supermarket giant REWE with plans to sell in the stores in 2022.

"I think the future is very promising," says Issam Kattan, the chief executive officer of one of the company's main subsidiaries. "I think Germans will realize that we can enrich their culture." He came to Germany in 2017 with his wife and daughters.

UNITED STATES

Waheed Saffour had a small interior design business in Homs when the uprising erupted in the spring of 2011. He was 30 at the time and his wife Ghina Jaber had just given birth to their first child Nader.

Fed up with the indignity, injustice and corruption which he and most Syrians were experiencing in almost every aspect of their lives, Waheed joined peaceful protests against the regime. But when the regime began besieging and shelling residential neighborhoods and people took up arms to defend themselves, Waheed and his family fled to the relative safety of the capital Damascus. The sound of explosions in Homs had traumatized his son who would get up in the middle of the night and start screaming.

The family stayed for about a year in Damascus and then had to flee once more to neighboring Jordan as the conflict spread to the capital and its suburbs. It was a precarious existence in Jordan. Waheed worked odd jobs illegally because he could not afford the fees required for a work permit. His second child Nibal was born in Jordan. As refugees, the family received some assistance from the UNHCR but this did not include coverage for the medical care Nader needed to treat his epilepsy. They applied for resettlement in a third country and were contacted in 2016 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) which vetted them for immigration to the U.S. They went through a year of interviews and background and security checks before they got approved.

Waheed and his family arrived in the U.S. in early January 2017 just before Donald Trump started his term as president and issued a decree suspending the resettlement of refugees from Syria and banning people from several predominantly Muslim countries including Syrians from entering the U.S[92].

With the help of a resettlement agency Waheed and his family moved into an apartment in Patterson, New Jersey, 20 miles from New York City. His resettlement agency was the International Rescue Committee; the U.S. government works with nine such agencies which have field offices throughout the country[93]. Like all refugees, the family received financial assistance for three months under the U.S. State Department's Reception and Placement Program[94]. The resettlement agency helped Waheed find a job, register in a language class, enroll his children in school and secure healthcare coverage and rental and living assistance through federally-funded local programs. Waheed was so eager to become self-sufficient that one year later he was off all welfare programs and just kept the medical aid for the sake of his son Nader. He moved into an apartment in nearby South Paterson which has a large Middle Eastern community. And after a series of jobs he was hired in 2021 by Amazon to work at a nearby sorting center. His children are healthy and thriving and his wife Ghina has adjusted to life in America after being homesick in the first two years.

"Life in the U.S. is so, so, so beautiful," says Waheed who has eagerly embraced the so-called American dream. He is already making plans to one day start his own business and buy a house in a better part of New Jersey. He just wishes more Syrians are given the opportunity to come to the U.S.

92 BBC News, "Trump Suspends U.S. Refugee Programme and Bans Syrians Indefinitely", www.bbc.com, January 28, 2017.
93 UNHCR USA, "U.S. Resettlement Partners", www.unhcr.org.
94 U.S. Department of State, "Reception and Placement: Bureau of Population, Refugees & Migration", www.state.gov.

"Syrians are hard workers and care about their family and children," he said. "America needs to bring at least 100,000 Syrians, they can do it."

America, a nation built by immigrants and long seen as a haven for people fleeing wars and dictatorships, has only resettled 27,920 Syrian refugees between the period starting October 1, 2011 and ending September 30, 2022[95].

And from 2011 until the end of 2020 another estimated 5,500 Syrians were granted asylum in the U.S[96]. bringing the total to about 33,500, less than those taken in by a single town in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

A big reason is politics. The Syrian conflict broke out during the presidency of Barack Obama, who was eager to maintain the conflict and its repercussions at arms-length because he was partly elected and reelected for a second term on the promise of extricating America from the Middle East and its troubles. Later, a backlash against immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East catapulted Trump into power. The fear that immigrants and refugees from these places could one day outnumber Americans of European heritage continues to fuel Trumpism which now dominates the Republican Party. This is also at the heart of the "Great Replacement" theory (immigrants and refugees supposedly replacing descendants of Europeans) embraced by reinvigorated white supremacy groups in the U.S[97].

Another major factor is the legacy of the September 11, 2001 attacks on America which completely changed immigration policies and processes particularly when it comes to Muslims and people from the Middle East.

"One enormous obstacle is the security and background check process which many years since 9/11 has grown into an uncontrollable monster," says Anwen Hughes, director of legal strategy in the refugee program at the New York-based Human Rights First, which has been lobbying for more Syrian refugees to be resettled in the U.S.

A Syrian refugee assigned for resettlement in the U.S. must undergo the following[98]:

- Their name is first run through the Consular Lookout and Support System to see if they are on any watch-lists.

- Before the resettlement process proceeds, a Syrian is among those who has to get security clearance from a number of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies through a review process known as Security Advisory Opinion.

- A Syrian is flagged for additional security screening through a review by a Refugee Affairs Division officer at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) headquarters.

- A USCIS officer travels to the refugee's location to conduct a face-to-face interview with the applicant and all family members above the age of 14.

- The officer collects fingerprints and photographs and three separate biometric checks are run through the FBI's Next Generation Identification System and the Automated Biometric Identification System of both the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Defense.

- Upon acceptance and before travel to the U.S. the National Counterterrorism Center conducts what's called an Interagency Check to make sure there are not any new red flags.

Despite all these procedures Trump spoke of ordering "extreme vetting" of immigrants and refugees particularly those from predominantly Muslim countries[99].

Elora Mukherjee, director of the Immigrants' Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School in New York says the Trump administration's "orchestrated effort to decimate the asylum and refugee processing system in the U.S." and efforts to shut the door for immigrants and refugees from places deemed "undesirable" have a long-term and profound impact regardless of who's in power.

Please Don't Forget Us - Syria Exhibit at US Holocaust Memorial Museum - Washington DC, 2019. Wikimedia commons / Adam Jones.

95 Refugee Processing Center, "Refugee Arrivals Fiscal Year by Nationality and Religion Group and Religion October 1, 2009 through September 30, 2022", www.wrapsnet.org.
96 Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, "Fiscal Year 2020 Refugees & Asylees Annual Flow Report", March 8, 2022.
97 Anti-Defamation League, "The Great Replacement: An Explainer", www.adl.org, April 19, 2021.
98 Syrian Community Network, "Still Welcome: Syrian Refugees, U.S. Resettlement Policies and Community Response", report published September 2019.
99 Carrie DeCell, "Trump's 'Extreme Vetting' is Muzzling Activists and Shutting them Out", The Guardian, April 20, 2018.

Hands Off Syria emergency rally, USA 2017. Wikimedia commons / Alec Perkins.

In addition to slashing the overall number of refugees admitted to the U.S. to historic lows (about 11,800 in the fiscal year 2020, the lowest ever since the formal resettlement program was established in 1980), the Trump administration gutted the system by significantly cutting the budget for resettlement services within the U.S. and shutting all international field offices that work on resettlement and family reunification. Trump also issued a decree giving states and local communities the right to decide whether they wanted to receive refugees.

Prof. Mukherjee says the Biden administration has not done enough to reverse Trump's damage which she says is most likely due to political considerations and the mid-term elections in 2022.

"There have been times in U.S. history when this country welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees at a time, for example at the end of the Vietnam War; we are not doing that anymore," she said.

"America was built on the hard work of immigrants but now we are asking: Is our future a nation of immigrants or is our future one that is animated by white nationalism?"

Legal Status

Once Syrian refugees make it to the U.S. they, like all other resettled refugees, are given permanent residency and can apply for citizenship after five years. The path is straightforward and there are usually few complications.

The big legal challenge is for those Syrians who have applied for asylum or have been granted temporary protected status after they have entered the U.S. on a visa. Like all those applying for asylum in the U.S., Syrians have to wait a long time before they have their case heard by an asylum officer. This wait period can be up to 8-10 years if the application is rejected and the asylee decides to appeal to an immigration judge to avert being removed from the U.S.—this process is known as defensive asylum.

There are about 1.3 million asylum cases backlogged in the immigration court system and possibly hundreds of thousands at the level of the asylum offices, according to Prof. Mukherjee. The problem is compounded by a succession of refugee crises stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and large numbers trying to enter through the U.S. border with Mexico. Add to that the chaos, gridlock and delays provoked by Trump's policies and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The process itself can be incredibly distressing and unpredictable with asylum officers having broad discretion in how they conduct interviews, interpret the facts of an asylum case and ultimately whether to grant or reject asylum.

"Grant rates across the country vary dramatically, if you apply in Texas your grant rate is way lower than if you apply in New York, goes back to discretion, it's a very discretionary process," said Tarek Roshdy Hassan, a New York-based lawyer who while in law school was part of a team at Columbia's Immigrants' Rights Clinic that represented a Syrian asylum applicant.

Marcelle Shehwaro, an activist and opposition figure from Aleppo, has been targeted by both the Syrian regime and Islamist militants. She worked for years from inside Syria and in neighboring Turkey on supporting and empowering communities in opposition-held areas of Syria that were under assault by the Assad regime and its allies and backers. She came to the U.S. in 2018 on what's called an F-1 visa for students to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at Columbia University on a full scholarship. Like many Syrians of her generation she wanted to step back and try to make sense of everything that has happened to her and her people and country since the start of their uprising in 2011.

She had to go back to Turkey in March 2020 in the midst of the pandemic to extend her visa because doing it at the border with Canada was not an option for people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Sudan and Yemen—the countries included in Trump's Muslim ban. She only got a three-month extension on her F-1 visa and had no choice but to apply for asylum when she returned to the U.S. in the fall of 2020.

She had a hard time coming to grips with the asylum application process which she said entailed writing down "all the horrible things" and traumas inflicted upon her by the conflict. She went through three lawyers with one of them recommending that she play up the fact she's Christian.

"She said I should apply for religious persecution because my political story is too complicated and would just prolong the process," said Ms. Shehwaro. "But I do not want to be the Christian girl against the 'Muslim barbarians.'"

Her third lawyer delivered the sobering truth about the U.S. asylum process.

"She told me that the process has no nuance and that we will hit a wall if I attempt to translate it from a list of traumas to nuance, nobody cares about nuance and complexity," said Ms. Shehwaro.

Her first interview with an asylum officer was at the end of August in 2021. She said she felt most of the line of questioning revolved around her proving she's not "a terrorist" and that she's had no dealings with "terrorists."

It may take years before she knows whether her asylum has been approved. Some Syrians around her have been waiting for six years. In the interim, like all asylum applicants she has been allowed to live and work in the U.S. but the work authorization was not issued right away—it takes anywhere from 6 months to 1 year after the submission of the asylum application to get it, putting immense financial pressure on asylees.

So Ms. Shehwaro applied for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) when the Biden administration renewed it for Syrians in March 2021 for a period of 18 months. With TPS she can get work authorization right away. (TPS is a temporary immigration status that protects nationals from designated countries experiencing war, disaster or extraordinary conditions from being deported; it's usually for a limited time and is at the discretion of the government's executive branch).

Ahed Festuk, an activist and protest organizer who hails from Idlib and has lived in Aleppo where she worked as a paramedic and in relief efforts on the frontlines. She came to the U.S. in 2015 on a tourist visa to collaborate with the International Institute of War and Peace on highlighting civic activism in Syria to decision makers in Washington D.C. while helping correct the perception that the Syrian opposition is dominated by armed groups and Islamists. As the Syrian regime, Iranian-backed militias and the Russian military closed in on rebel-controlled eastern Aleppo in 2016, Ms. Festuk had no choice but to overstay her visa and apply for asylum in the U.S.

Her asylum interview took place five years later in the spring of 2021. It was over a video connection and lasted almost 5 hours.

"The person did not know anything about my case, he did not read my case," she said.

"It was a humiliating experience, you have to show this person who has never been in a war that you are not violent and that you will not be a threat to his safety and safety of others; the process made me feel worthless."

While she awaits the verdict on her asylum application, Ms. Festuk is studying political science and sociology on a full scholarship at Bard College in upstate New York.

Another Syrian who spoke on condition of anonymity came to the U.S. in 2015 on an F-1 visa to study at a university in the Midwest. She applied for asylum in 2019 but was rejected. Her brother, who had come to the U.S. three years before her in 2012, did get asylum. He has permanent residency and is on the path of citizenship.

She thinks the reason she was rejected was because she had to go back to Damascus in 2016 to be with her sick mother.

"There was no way to convince them that it was absolutely necessary and that I would not take the risk just like that; it was going to be me or nobody to be with my mother," she said.

She decided not to appeal the decision. The other options she had were to apply for Withholding of Removal or to ask for relief under the Convention Against Torture, but the standard of proof for both is much higher than asylum and they offer fewer benefits.

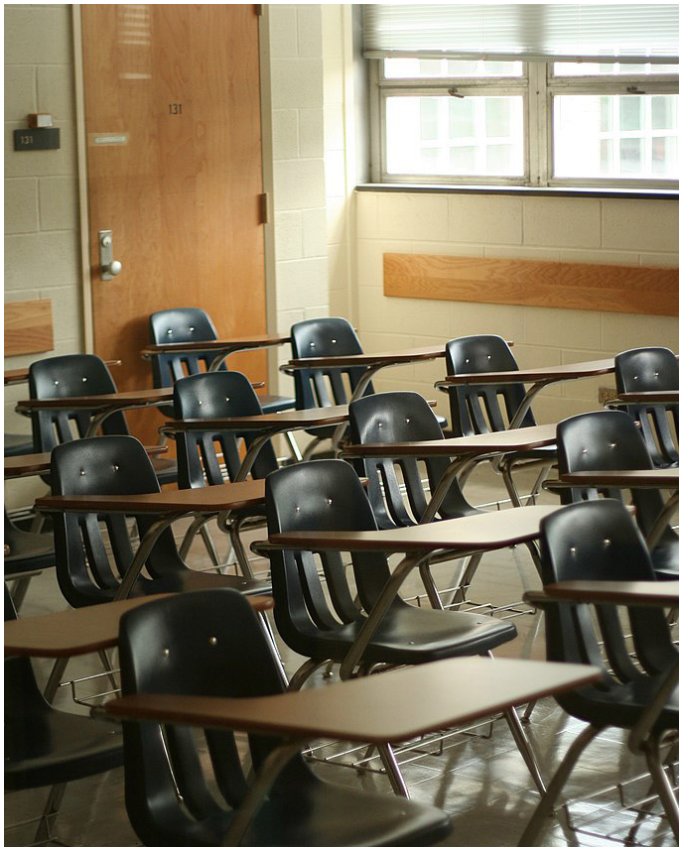
"I was scared of having to go to court on my own and stand in front of a judge and I was emotionally down and I did not want to fight anymore," she said.

After her asylum was rejected in 2019 she was able to stay in the U.S. for one year after graduation on what's called Optional Practical Training (OPT) for foreign students. Her OPT expired in Dec 2020 and she packed her bags and was about to return to Syria but in early March 2021 the Biden administration renewed the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Syrians for 18 months. It was renewed for another 18 months at the end of July 2022[100]. There are currently about 6,000 Syrians on TPS in the U.S.

"It's a roller coaster, your future is uncertain, you can't plan long-term and you're always reminded that you don't belong," said another Syrian woman who applied for asylum in 2020 but is still awaiting the answer.

Language and Integration Courses

Except for the financial assistance that refugees get during the first three months of their stay in the U.S., the system expects people to work and be self-sufficient fairly quickly. Unlike Germany and other countries, the U.S. has no formal structures to help newly-arrived refugees learn English and integrate into society. Free English as second language classes are mainly available through adult education programs administered by local non-profits, school districts and community colleges. But the problem is that there are not enough programs to meet all the demand for these courses and many refugees simply do not have the time because they have to work to survive. About six months after they arrive in the U.S., refugees have to begin repaying to their resettlement agency the costs associated with their travel to the country.



Classroom in the US for language and integration classes. Wikimedia commons / Brent Hoard.

100 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Temporary Protected Status Designated Country: Syria", www.uscis.gov.

"If you don't have the language you will remain on the margins and you don't get good work," says one official with a resettlement agency that works with newly arrived refugees including Syrians.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the cultural orientation course that resettlement agencies administer as part of their contract with the U.S. State Department is no more than a lecture for a couple of hours about U.S. laws that most refugees will simply forget.

"It's just a checkmark on our list," said the official.

Resettled refugees who want to become citizens have to pass an English test, which became longer and more difficult following changes implemented during Trump's last year in power. Many Americans now feel refugees who do not speak English should not become citizens and have the right to vote—this is a polarizing issue in American society following Trump's claims that he was cheated out of a second term partly due to alleged lax voting rules and systems[101].

Students and staff at the Karam House in Reyhanli. In 2016 Lina Sergie-Attar, a Syrian American architect and writer, established the first Karam House in Reyhanli, a Turkish town close to the Syrian border that became the first stop for most fleeing Syrians.

Education

Newly arrived Syrian refugee children have enrolled fast in elementary, middle and high schools but the level of support they get and the progress they make varies widely from one school district to another.

Mohammed Sabbagh and his wife Duaa fled with their children to Jordan shortly after his baby girl died in the 2013 chemical weapons attack on the suburbs of Damascus. Before fleeing Syria he was briefly arrested and tortured by the regime for displaying rage and anger at the government hospital where he had rushed his dying daughter.

After spending eight years in Jordan, the family was resettled in the U.S. in May 2021.

In the fall of 2021 18-year-old Samer and 16-year-old Sami were enrolled in a high school in Elizabeth, New Jersey where the family settled. Their sister Salam, who is 14, started eighth grade.

The siblings said they were surprised how welcoming students and teachers were.

"We were in Jordan for eight years and people hardly spoke to us because we are Syrians," said Sami, who loves animals and wants to be a veterinary doctor. "Here they make us feel special but over there they treat us as aliens."

But the picture was different in one school district in southwest Michigan where a teacher admitted that many newly arrived refugee children including Syrians were being "failed by the system." She says refugee children in her class have to attend separate English as second language classes administered by the county but that they barely improve. She says she often has to use Google translate to communicate with refugee students.

Beyond basic and secondary education, vocational education and job training programs like those available to Syrians in Germany are almost nonexistent. The U.S. has one of the best higher education systems in the world and Syrians who have had the chance to come to the U.S. after 2011 to pursue undergraduate and graduate studies have generally excelled.

Nour Audi finished medical school as the popular uprising erupted in Syria in 2011. He was a volunteer with the Syrian Red Crescent and worked with several humanitarian organizations. Like many health workers Dr. Audi was arrested and interrogated by the Syrian regime's security forces for a few months.

He came to the U.S. on a student visa in the summer of 2017 to pursue a Master Degree in Public Health at the prestigious Brown University in the state of Rhode Island. He was accompanied by his wife, also a physician. They came during a window when a judge in New York had deemed Trump's ban on Syrians and other Muslims to be unconstitutional. Dr. Audi had a full scholarship to attend Brown. He used part of the scholarship money to help his wife complete her board certification in the U.S.

He finished his studies at Brown in May

101 Joseph Tanfani and Simon Lewis, "As Trump Pushes Baseless Fraud Claims, Republicans Pledge Tougher Voting Rules", Reuters, December 21, 2020.

"If you are a refugee you are a person in need while I was seeing myself as a provider," he said. "I felt I did not need it: I am privileged, in an Ivy League school, a physician; if I am the one to apply for asylum, then what about the others."

He got accepted by the world-renowned Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University on a special scholarship reserved for displaced persons. He is so worried about his legal status in the U.S. that in addition to his pending asylum application, he's trying to renew his expired student visa and has secured an HP-2 visa as a companion to his wife who got a work visa through her employer the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York.

"Very smart students get accepted on full scholarships but they don't get their visas," says Hasan Taki-Eddin, who came to the U.S. in 2013 and graduated from the University of Evansville in Indiana in 2017 with a degree in accounting and finance. He and his parents and brother were granted asylum in the U.S.

He now works for a major accounting and consulting firm and he's helping mentor and support Syrian and Iraqi students in their quest to pursue higher education in the U.S. through an initiative called the Syrian Youth Empowerment. Since its creation in 2015 the non-profit has raised $22 million to support Syrian students with scholarships and financial aid. The need is great particularly now that many U.S. colleges and universities have cut back on their Syria specific scholarships as the conflict has dropped off the news headlines, according to Mr. Taki-Eddin.

Work

Syrians are entrepreneurial by nature and have thrived in America, where many have seized the opportunities to start their own businesses.

Maysaa Waidh and her husband Abdulkader Badet and their five children fled Aleppo in 2013. Their first stop was Syria's western coast, where they stayed for a year and a half before they were on the run once more, this time to Turkey. In 2016 they got approved for resettlement in the U.S. and arrived in November of that year, days after Trump came to power.

"I was really scared when Trump won, I was afraid it could affect our chances to become citizens," said Ms. Waidh.

Her husband kept telling her "what's wrong with you, you're in America, you're no longer in Syria, take this fear from your heart."

They settled in a suburb of Detroit Michigan where Shadia Martini, a member of the established Syrian diaspora in Michigan helped them secure an apartment, gave them a car and even volunteered to teach them English. She also helped Abdulkader find a job in a local grocery store and the children enroll in schools. Their children worked part time too and Maysaa began to do some paid catering work from her home kitchen.

Six years Maysaa built a successful catering business which allowed the family to buy a new house and car. They have all become U.S. citizens. A daughter has enrolled in college, another is finishing high school and two others are in eighth grade.

Health

Syrians like all refugees get eight months health insurance coverage upon arrival under what's called Refugee Medical Assistance. After that they can apply for free health insurance under Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program but they have to meet certain requirements which vary from state to state. So access is not guaranteed. The situation is much tougher for those who come to the U.S. outside the refugee resettlement program. Many of those that come on a visa and then decide to apply for asylum often have no coverage whatsoever.

Hospital in Manassas, USA. Wikimedia commons / Novant Health.

Coming to the U.S. is often life saving for many Syrians with health issues and handicaps developed during the conflict.

Mohammad Sabbagh, who lost his baby girl in the 2013 chemical attack on the Damascus suburbs, sustained a permanent handicap in his shoulder as a result of the severe torture he was subjected to by the regime's security services. In Jordan they told him an operation to ameliorate his situation would cost $100,000. He qualified for health insurance when he and his family were resettled in the U.S. He hopes to get the operation done in America but in the interim he needs constant help and assistance which is provided by his wife Duaa. But she will have to work soon because the amount of social assistance that they have been receiving has been cut back. This will leave him without a caregiver. His children go to school and will also have to work part time so the family could make ends meet.

Another health challenge for Syrians is getting adequate psychological and mental aid for the all the traumas they have sustained during the conflict and the displacement period that preceded their resettlement. Getting access to the right care that accommodates their cultural sensitivities and often limited language skills is a big challenge for them in the U.S. In fairness this is a problem for many in the U.S. whether they are resettled refugees or not.

Relations with host communities

Starting in 2015 Syrian refugees were vilified and subjected to hatred and racism during a period that coincided with an uptick in attacks by ISIS against the West and U.S.-led military campaign against the group in Iraq and Syria. Trump and his allies and media backers fueled this backlash by essentially portraying Syrian refugees as potential "terrorists." Trump claimed that if elected his rival Hillary Clinton would bring in 620,000 Syrian refugees—a blatant lie[102].Trump and those in his circle including his son incessantly claimed that Syrian refugees were a threat to America[103].One of Trump's supporters said they would "bring disease and crime."

Although the belligerent rhetoric against Syrians and other refugees has since eased, the U.S. remains highly polarized over this issue and whether the country should be open to refugees and asylum seekers particularly from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.

It's important to note that this division in society over how many newcomers should be allowed into the country and from where and under what circumstances does not run neatly along the lines of those of European heritage and those who are not. Many Americans who are themselves immigrants from Africa, Asia and South America supported Trump and still support restrictions on refugees and asylum seekers coming to the country.

Syria Fest 2018, Washington DC. Wikimedia commons / S Pakhrin.

Yahya Basha, a native of Hama, came to the U.S. in 1972 to complete his medical specialty. He ended up staying, becoming a U.S. citizen, building a successful radiology business in southwest Michigan and rising as a prominent leader in Arab-American and Muslim-American circles. More than a 100 members of his family immigrated to the U.S. over the years, particularly in the aftermath of the 1982 Hama massacre committed by the Assad regime. There are 22 physicians in the Basha family. He has collaborated with and advised the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations. He's a vocal advocate of refugee resettlement in the U.S.

During a recent interview he recalled how during a meeting a few years ago with one of the two senators representing Michigan in Congress to discuss the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the state it was a local official of Lebanese origin who sounded the most objection to this.

"This official told the senator: 'We don't want Syrian refugees here; I am afraid a Syrian refugee will kill or kidnap me or my children,'" said Dr. Basha. (Michigan was one of 31 states that temporarily suspended the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the aftermath of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris claimed by ISIS).

Going forward one major challenge for Syrians and all refugees and immigrants in general, even those who have been in America for decades, is the overt racism, discrimination, hatred and sometimes deadly violence being directed at them since the rise of Trump into politics and elected office.

"He (Trump) did not make them, he just opened the lid" said Dr. Basha about white nationalists and supremacists.

But on the other end of the spectrum Syrian refugees have received tremendous support from many segments of U.S. society particularly Christian and Jewish groups and associations.

American Jews, many of them survivors of the Holocaust or descendants of those who perished in Nazi concentration camps, see parallels between their own experiences and those of Syrians.

102 Ben Jacobs, "Trump Says Syrian Refugees Aren't Just a Terrorist Threat, They'd Hurt Quality of Life", The Guardian, September 21, 2016.
103 Bonnie Malkin, "Donald Trump Jr. Compares Syrian Refugees to Poisoned Skittles", The Guardian, September 20, 2016.

Deputy Secretary Blinken Visits a Community Center in Amman Serving Jordan-Based Refugees to Reinforce U.S. Commitment to Support Syrian Refugee Communities, 2015. Wikimedia commons / U.S. Department of State.

Susie Friedman's ancestors came to the U.S. from Russia and her late husband was a holocaust survivor who fled Soviet-occupied Hungary in the 1950s and settled briefly in Canada before making it to Michigan. She is among dozens in in her community who volunteer to help Syrian refugees in their resettlement process in the U.S.

On the national level the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), founded in 1881 to assist Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe, has been one of the most active groups helping resettle Syrian refugees. It is one of the nine resettlement agencies contracted by the U.S. State Department. HIAS works on multiple fronts to support Syrian refugees, providing legal services to refugees and asylum seekers, helping the most vulnerable integrate into their new communities and lobby the U.S. government for more resettlement of Syrian refugees. It works in 12 states and has rallied more than 360 synagogues across the country to support Syrian refugees in their resettlement.

Political Dimension & Long-term Prospects

The U.S. is more involved in the affairs and modern history of Syria than it ever wishes to admit. For decades successive U.S. administrations have had an on and off relationship with the Syrian regime. Supporting and rewarding it when it was in the U.S. interest like brokering peace between Israel and Syria, enlisting Syria's help to stabilize Lebanon and Iraq and cooperating with the regime's intelligence services after the 9/11 attacks including as part of the infamous CIA extraordinary rendition program. At the same time the U.S. has punished, sanctioned and ostracized the regime when it has accused it of sponsoring terrorism since the 1970s and later supporting the insurgency in Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion.

In the years before the uprising the Obama administration and European governments had actively engaged with Assad's regime and even praised him as a reformer. A few months after the 2011 uprising and as the regime continued to kill and torture protesters the U.S. demanded that Assad step down and later warned him that it would respond if he used chemical weapons. But Obama wanted to remain detached and not plunge into another war in the Middle East even after the so-called chemical weapons red line was breached. The U.S. mainly got involved in partnering with Kurdish militias in the northeast to fight ISIS. This desire to keep Syria and its troubles at bay is amply reflected in the U.S. decision to take in very few Syrian refugees notwithstanding the important financial contributions to the humanitarian effort within Syria and in neighboring countries where most of the refugees are concentrated.

But in recent years one important element has emerged within America that has had an important role in shaping U.S. policy toward the Syrian crisis: A small but wealthy, influential and well-connected Syrian-American community. Before 2011, it was estimated that there were about 60,000 Syrian Americans living mostly in large metropolitan areas like Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and New York. Many are well-established professionals, especially doctors and successful entrepreneurs. When the uprising began in 2011 they quickly sprang to action. Existing organizations like the Syrian American Medical Association (SAMS) a professional association founded in 1998 and the Syrian American Council (SAC) which was formed in 2005 found a new purpose. SAMS became one of the leading humanitarian and medical aid organizations working in opposition held areas while SAC mobilized to lobby the U.S. government to support the revolution and the opposition and maintain pressure and sanctions on the Assad regime. Several other groups also emerged after 2011 like the Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF) and Americans for a Free Syria (AFS).

A turning point for Syrian-American political influence came in 2016 when the Free Syria Political Action Committee was created to allow members of the community to support members of Congress that defended their agenda. It's worth noting that the SETF played a pivotal role in lobbying for and drafting the Caesar Syria Civil Protection Act, which became law in 2020 and was named after the Syrian military police photographer who defected with tens of thousands of horrific photographs of victims of the regime's torture. The Caesar Act significantly expanded the U.S. government authority to sanction all those doing business with the Assad regime including third parties. Between June and December of 2020, the U.S. imposed sanctions on 113 companies and individuals of which 15 were directly under the Caesar Act[104].

104 Howard J. Shatz, "The Power and Limits of Threat: The Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act at One Year", The Rand Blog, July 8, 2021.

No new sanctions have been imposed ever since as the Biden administration focused on the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the threats from China, dialing down tensions and reinstating the nuclear deal with key Assad regime backer Iran and most recently confronting Russia and dealing with the repercussions of its invasion of Ukraine. In tandem key U.S. allies in the region like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have normalized ties with the Assad regime or are on the path of doing so.

"The regime is being resuscitated and people are demoralized and exhausted," said Mohammed Alaa Ghanem, a Syrian academic and activist who has served as the Syrian American Council's senior political adviser, strategist and director of government relations.

He's currently completing a Master in Public Administration at Harvard's Kennedy School and getting ready to apply for asylum in the U.S. He described the U.S. reluctance to resettle more Syrian refugees as "a moral failure."

If the U.S. reverses course and decides to resettle more Syrians particularly those in Lebanon and Turkey many experts say this will require significant changes and investment.

Collaboration and Coexistence

The Syrian Community Network's Suzanne Akhras: Ms. Akhras, a Chicago-based Syrian-American, founded the Syrian Community Network (SCN) in 2015 to bring awareness to the Syrian refugee crisis and to support those who were being resettled in the U.S.

SCN, which has a base in Chicago and presence in Atlanta, Phoenix, San Diego and Tucson, has partnered with refugee resettlement agencies and their local chapters, faith-based organizations across America, mosques, synagogues, churches, business leaders, elected officials and other groups to help Syrian refugees that come to the U.S., particularly trying to address their long-term needs.

SCN has provided refugees with rent assistance, driver's education courses, English as second language courses, support in completing all types of paperwork including immigration documents and applications and help finding and applying for jobs. It also has a program helping children with math and English skills and providing them with emotional support to integrate at school and cope with bullying.

Organizations like SCN are indispensable given the lack of meaningful federal and state funding for programs that support refugee integration.

Ms. Akhras described watching the whole system being gutted during the Trump years and how private donations from wealthy individuals and Christian and Jewish groups kept SCN going.

"I have learned to be resilient; we stayed the course and we survived the Trump years," she said.

She says it's urgent that the U.S. government expand and modernize its resettlement program which is still "stuck in the 1980s." And she believes the U.S. can do much more in resettling Syrian refugees stuck in Lebanon, Turkey and other countries in the region.

"If we do not bring in new immigrants and refugees then this will be the slow demise of America," she said.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

• Donor states, Western and Middle Eastern countries hosting Syrian refugees, wealthy Arab states, multilateral organizations and NGOs must come together to rethink the way they are currently addressing the on-going Syrian refugee crisis. It's no longer about just providing basic needs. It may take Syrians years and possibly decades to return to their country. Stakeholders must urgently and in a coordinated manner put forward solutions that address this reality.

• Lebanon with support from stakeholders must think of innovative ways in which the Syrian refugee population can contribute to revitalizing local communities while earning enough to live in dignity. Urgent solutions are needed to give Syrian refugee children access to a meaningful education.

• Turkey must resolve the precarious legal status of Syrian refugees which is a major obstacle for self-fulfillment. Turkey must do more to combat the hate speech, violence and incitement being directed at Syrian refugees and come up with integration programs that foster coexistence and understanding between Syrians and Turks.

• Germany has been exemplary in processing the asylum applications of Syrian refugees and supporting them in their quest to establish themselves in their new home. But Germany must think about the future and what it needs to do to promote coexistence and understanding between Syrians, Germans and members of other immigrant communities.

• The U.S. must resettle more Syrian refugees and allocate more funding to supporting newcomers. Many Syrians have skills urgently needed in all sectors of the US economy.

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

ABOUT KAS

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation whose civic education program aims at promoting freedom and liberty, peace and justice. Through its work, KAS strengthens democratic values, good governance and the rule of law while providing civil society support as well as research and analysis. The KAS Lebanon Office engages with topics of political, social and economic relevance including political reforms and participation, transparency and accountability, reconciliation, conflict transformation and combating the root causes of flight and migration that do not only concern Lebanon but also neighboring Syria and the Middle East more broadly. A continuous political dialogue and cultural exchange between Lebanon, the region and Europe is encouraged to find common ways and solutions to such challenging questions and to contribute to greater regional peace and prosperity.

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