



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Nowhere Left to Go: Syrian Refugees Head to Europe

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Sep 2015

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Introduction

The numbers of Syrians escaping their country and crossing the Mediterranean toward Europe has increased sharply in recent months, and the United Nations projects that by the end of 2016, at least 850,000 Syrian refugees will have left their country over a two-year span.¹ Mass migration from Syria began in 2012, following the militarization of the Syrian revolution, at which point the Syrian regime adopted a “scorched earth” policy of collective punishment against the residents of towns not under its control. The rate of exodus increased following the regime’s adoption of a policy of indiscriminate shelling of rebel-held territories, which also served to diminish the armed opposition’s ability to administer areas under its control, setting the stage for armed jihadist groups to seize power and impose their worldviews on local communities. These conditions accelerated the pace at which waves of Syrians fled the country. At present, about 4 million Syrians are refugees outside of Syria – a staggering percentage of the prewar population of 21.9 million.²

The Beginnings

At the beginning of the conflict, Syrian migration to Europe was limited to well-to-do Syrians, civil society activists and relief and aid workers, and those who were already studying or working in the European Union and who had managed to secure official recognition of their refugee status. Most Syrian refugees sought safety not in Europe, but rather in the countries surrounding Syria—Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon—where they waited to return to their home country once a resolution to its crisis could be found. In addition, Egypt under the rule of former President Mohammed Morsi was a particularly attractive destination for middle-class Syrian refugees for a variety of reasons, including a “reciprocal treatment” law that gave them the same access as Egyptians to health and education services and streamlined residency procedures, as well as the right to engage in commercial activities and the comparatively low cost of

¹ Stephanie Nebehay, “U.N. says 850,000 to cross sea to Europe this year and next,” Reuters, September 9, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/09/us-europe-migrants-idUSKCN0R71EX20150909>

² “World Refugee Day: 10 Facts about Syrian Refugees in Turkey,” World Food Program, June 19, 2015, <https://www.wfp.org/stories/world-refugee-day-syrian-refugees-turkey>. The scope of the humanitarian disaster is compounded by the 8 million or so Syrians displaced within Syria.

living in Egypt when compared to countries neighboring Syria.³ As a result, and as indicated by figures claimed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the numbers of Syrian refugees who submitted asylum applications in Europe between the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and January 2014 was only approximately 90,000.⁴ The numbers of refugees grew rapidly in 2014 as it became clear that the principles stated in the final communiqué of the Geneva II conference on Syria (January and February 2014) would not be honored and a negotiated resolution to the Syrian conflict was unlikely. By then, Syrian refugees began heading for Europe because living conditions for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt were deteriorating. The expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) into Kurdish inhabited areas (such as Kobane) pushed out far greater numbers of refugees.

Within the European Union, Germany was a particularly attractive destination for Syrian refugees, owing to the country's regulations on refugee housing and residency, family reunification, and social security and the German authorities' non-enforcement of the Dublin Regulation, which had previously compelled refugees arriving in Europe to register as refugees/asylum seekers in the first European Union member state in which they arrived. Data from the UNHCR shows that in the year starting in July 2014, more than 100,000 Syrian refugees arrived in Germany, representing close to 25% of the total refugee influx into Europe.

According to the European Commission for Refugees, more than 28,000 Syrian refugees arrived in Europe in June 2015 and 32,000 in July. Projections from a variety of agencies suggest that these numbers are likely to increase further still, with the UN predicting that between 4,000 and 5,000 Syrians will arrive in Europe on a daily basis.⁵

³ "UNHCR in Cairo: 'Morsi adopts open door policy to Syrian refugees: 100, 000 Syrians expected in Egypt by the end of the year . . . and what happened to the Ethiopian refugees was a popular response,'" *Youm 7* (in Arabic), June 20, 2013,

<http://www.youm7.com/story/0000/0/0/-/1124616#.VfFUrRGqkqk>

⁴ See "Europe: Syrian Asylum Applications from April 2011 to August 2015," UNHCR, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/asylum.php>

⁵ Associated Press, "The latest: Israel blames migrant crisis on militant Islam," September 8, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/latest-germany-budgets-6-6-billion-support-migrants-070653532.html>

Factors Behind the Latest Wave of Syrian Refugees

The latest surge in the numbers of Syrian refugees can be attributed to the following factors:

- A diminishing window of opportunity for a political solution to the Syrian crisis. The expansion of ISIL forces into territory previously held by the regime invigorated global efforts for a negotiated resolution to the Syrian crisis, a possibility which received additional public attention following an apparent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Russia, both of which expressed a desire to reconcile their differences over the Geneva I Communique. These hopes were quashed, however, by Moscow's insistence that Assad remain in power and the Russians' ongoing military support for the Syrian regime. These Russian policies drove large numbers of Syrians to search for stability in Europe, instead of waiting in limbo for an increasingly remote political resolution to their problem. Predictions that the conflict itself would last for several years to come—not to mention the decades that Syria would need to complete a reconstruction program—have driven even some Syrians who live in the Gulf states to seek refuge in Europe and secure a stable future for themselves and their families.
- Harsh conditions in the first group of host nations (Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon) have strained the financial resources of many Syrians, depleting their savings and obstructing their economic progress and the education of their children. With the exception of Turkey, the host countries are plagued by serious economic and social difficulties, unemployment, and a high cost of living. A reduction in UN support for Syrian refugees in these countries exacerbated this situation, particularly as it relates to the education of refugee children and healthcare for the refugee population in total. By contrast, Germany expressed an expectation that it would take in 800,000 refugees by the end of 2015.⁶ These realities faced many Syrian refugees starkly, incentivizing their departure to Europe.

⁶ Stephanie Ott, "Germany: 800,000 refugees -- and then what?" Al-Jazeera, September 9, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/09/germany-800000-refugees-150909065445586.html>

- Developments in Turkey served to make it a less welcoming destination. While Turkey presently hosts nearly 2 million Syrian refugees,⁷ the factors that made it the favored destination of Syrians fleeing conflict in their home country over the last four years are being undone. While Syrians based in Turkey formerly benefited from a geographic proximity to their home country, over time the Turkish government has taken measures that cut Syrian refugees off from their homeland. In addition, Syrian refugees cannot count on Turkey's support: Turkish prime minister Recep Teyyep Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party failed to secure the parliamentary majority needed to form the next government, which means that Erdogan is increasingly likely to form a ruling coalition with political parties opposed to the presence of Syrian refugees on Turkish soil (and, in some extreme cases, have called for an alliance with Bashar al-Assad to combat "terrorists"). This new reality drove Syrians out of the refugee camps in Turkey and onto the country's Aegean shores, from whence they could approach Europe. The Turkish authorities were complacent about this exodus and seemed to regard an influx of refugees in Europe as appropriate punishment for a continent that stood idly by as Syria's neighbors bore the brunt of the human calamity.
- Relatively more clement weather made Syrian refugees, especially those with families, more likely to embark on a seafaring voyage to Europe during the summer months, particularly after the repeated disasters that took place on the seas during the cold, tumultuous winter of 2015.

Repercussions

For most Syrian refugees, the chance to seek asylum in Europe holds out the prospect for a solution to the suffering they have endured since 2011. The chance to settle in Europe means, to them, some peace of mind, a chance for their children to receive an education, and the opportunity to work, not to mention other individual benefits. Yet

⁷ Michael Martinez, «Syrian Refugees : Which Countries Welcome them, Which Ones Don't», CNN, September 10, 2015:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/09/world/welcome-syrian-refugees-countries/>

large-scale Syrian migration to Europe will also have detrimental impacts on the Syrian people as a whole. Unlike the countries neighboring Syria, refugee status in Europe implies an eventual integration and naturalization of the refugees into the host country. Ultimately, these steps will make it less likely that these refugees will return home.

If the present pace of emigration from Syria continues, it is likely that hundreds of thousands of its citizens will flee the country in the coming years. Western officials have expressed plans ⁸to integrate Syrian refugees over the next five years; these statements serve to heighten anxieties that Western countries aim to prolong the Syrian crisis itself, choosing to focus solely on the human rights aspect of it. A long-term European accommodation with the refugee crisis would lead to a demographic disruption in Syria that would be no less severe and consequential than the Damascus regime's orchestrated campaign to force its own people out of the country.

This most recent wave of migration has decimated Syria's middle classes: the evidence suggests that those Syrian refugees leaving to Europe today are not the wretched of the Earth, otherwise consigned to the squalor of refugee camps, but rather come from the educated professional classes. Their motivations to reach Europe are related, in large part, to their desire to find stability and a secure livelihood for their families.

A recent report carried by Swedish broadcaster SVT illustrates this reality: Syrian refugees who arrived in Sweden in 2014 and who were granted indefinite leave to remain had the highest educational attainment of any group of refugees living in the country. Fully 37% of them had obtained either university or other tertiary education qualifications.⁹ The hemorrhage of the Syrian population will have a major negative impact on the future of Syria, making the process of post-conflict reconstruction more difficult. It seems likely that Syria will lose an entire generation of these youth, who will likely grow up in a cultural environment that is alien to that of their home country and in which they will gradually be stripped of their cultural identity. This will have implications for their future loyalties and priorities.

⁸ Holly Ellyat and Jenny Cosgrave, "UK pledges to take up to 20,000 more refugees", CNBC, September 7, 2015

<http://www.cnbc.com/2015/09/07/migrant-crisis-splits-european-countries.html>

⁹ See Ben Kendall, "High education levels among Syrian refugees," *Goteborg Today*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.goteborgdaily.se/high-education-levels-among-syrian-refugees-1>