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Who Are They? Two Profiles of Syrian Refugees

Patrycja Sasnal

Syrians constitute the biggest national group migrating to Europe in 2015, according to Frontex. Of all the social diversity within a single society, two generalised profiles of a Syrian refugee can be inferred from available information: a poorer, rural worker based in camps in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, and a richer, middle-class professional living outside of refugee camps, recently migrating to Europe via the Greece and Western Balkans route. While Europe has so far received the best of the Syrian society, poorer Syrians may also be on the move without an immediate and substantial improvement of educational infrastructure and their legal labour market status in host countries.

Full and certain information about the characteristics of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and elsewhere is by no means easily attainable. However, an approximate profile of a Syrian refugee can be inferred from available literature on Syrian society in general, its ethno-religious makeup, level of education and labour market structure. Such an approximate profile partially explains the reasons, speed and direction of the Syrian refugee migration, which to September 2015 constituted the biggest national group reaching EU borders.¹

Richer vs. Poorer

With high probability, the Syrians who have come to Europe in the past two years are from the richer part of Syrian society, previously employed outside of the agricultural sector (in services, trade, construction, health service, education etc.), well educated, economically active and accustomed to gender equality.

Despite the official unemployment level at only 10.8%,² an analysis of the Syrian market clearly proves that 60% of households had none or only one person employed. World bank data corroborate that. In 2007, more than 35% of Syrians lived under the national poverty line.³ But among the employed part of society,

¹ "710,000 Migrants Entered EU in First Nine Months of 2015," Frontex, 13 October 2015, <http://frontex.europa.eu/news/710-000-migrants-entered-eu-in-first-nine-months-of-2015-NUiBkk>.

² "Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)," World Bank data, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS/countries>.

³ "Syrian Arab Republic," World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/syrian-arab-republic>.

28% worked in the public sector, and in some regions (i.e., Latakia) every other family had a member working in that sector.⁴

Rural areas were naturally dominated by employment in agriculture, particularly among women, whereas in urban areas men worked mainly in services and construction and women in education, health services and public administration. The structure of the labour market in pre-war Syria also shows that illiterate women remained outside of the labour market but participation among women with secondary and higher education is almost identical to that of men.⁵ Some 57% of women employed in urban areas were managers or professionals (14% in rural areas) and 16% clerks, while 46% of men were technicians. The International Labour Organisation also found that engagement in economic activity was higher among Syrian refugees than the local host-country population (48.5% to 36.5%).⁶

It can be inferred from statistical data that with high probability poorer Syrian refugees, previously employed or self-employed in agriculture, often living under the national poverty line, could not have had the means for further migration to Europe and might not for some time to come. This group populates the refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan.

Many, or perhaps even the majority of Syrians who have reached Europe in the past year or two lived in Turkey after having had left Syria. Currently more than 1.7 million Syrians reside in Turkey, half of which are minors.⁷ Only a small part of this group lives in refugee camps (10–15%)—most of them have found accommodation elsewhere but is still dependent on UNHCR help since Syrian citizens cannot work legally in Turkey.

Lack of Education as “Push” Factor

The 800,000 Syrian children in Turkey have limited access to education.⁸ This is in stark contrast to the time before the civil war in Syria, when education was both normal and a priority for them and their families. According to UNESCO, before 2011, 99% of children were enrolled in primary and 89% in secondary schools. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) equalled 0.98, which meant that almost as many girls as boys attended schools. Illiteracy did not exceed 15% in general and 5% among young Syrians.⁹ It can therefore be inferred that for the Syrian population, education is a priority need that is not being met: around a quarter of school-age children go to school in Turkey.¹⁰ The situation of children in Lebanon and Jordan is equally poor,¹¹ with 420,000 Syrians needing education services in Lebanon and many out of school for two or more years,¹² which most probably constitutes an important factor in their parents' decisions to migrate to Europe.

The probability of Syrians migrating to Europe is the highest among refugees in Turkey, where language and social barriers, as well as insufficient aid programmes (run by largely underfinanced NGOs) hinder the creation of long-term, decent living conditions. This probability is lower among Syrians in Lebanon thanks to strong ethnic, linguistic and even family ties, although the strained resources of this small country—

⁴ G. Øvensen, P. Sletten, “The Syrian Labour Market: Findings from the 2003 Unemployment Survey,” Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, 2007, p. 32, <http://almashriq.hiof.no/general/300/320/327/fafo/reports/20002.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁶ S. Ajluni, M. Kavar, “The Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on the Labour Market in Jordan: A Preliminary Analysis,” International Labour Organization, 2014, www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/publication/wcms_242021.pdf.

⁷ “2015 UNHCR country operations profile—Turkey,” UNHCR, www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e48e0fa7f&submit=GO.

⁸ S. Dorman, “Educational Needs Assessment for Urban Syrian Refugees in Turkey,” UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=7898>.

⁹ “Syrian Arab Republic,” UNESCO, <http://en.unesco.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic>.

¹⁰ E. Ferris, K. Kirişçi, “What Turkey’s open-door policy means for Syrian refugees,” July 2015, www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/07/08-turkey-syrian-refugees-kirisci-ferris.

¹¹ “The Challenge of Education: The Future of Syria,” UNHCR, <http://unhcr.org/FutureOfSyria/the-challenge-of-education.html>.

¹² “Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon,” UNHCR, November 2014, www.proasyl.de/fileadmin/proasyl/fm_redakteure/Newsletter_Anhaenge/207/reach_lbn_report_syriacrisis_outofschoolchildrenprofiling_nov2014.pdf.

where a stunning quarter of the population are refugees—impede decent integration of everyone. Also with lower probability for migration are those in Jordan, where more than 600,000 Syrian refugees reside. Even though they cannot work legally, many of those living outside of camps manage to find jobs.

ILO's analysis on the impact of the refugees on Jordan shows that they have not worsened unemployment in the country.¹³ Even though they cannot work legally, unofficially they fill in niches in agriculture, construction or food services, which led ILO to conclude that the “enterprising and resourceful Syrian refugees, driven by their difficult livelihood conditions, will inexorably be pulled into the orbit of the Jordanian economy.”¹⁴ Even Syrians living in refugee camps, such as Jordan's Zaatari, with some 80,000 inhabitants, are trying to settle down there for a longer period, since they simply cannot afford the trip to Europe.¹⁵ This information implies that poorer Syrians can—with more favourable conditions and in cooperation with local authorities in the receiving country in the Middle East—make a living in that local labour market.

Diaspora as “Pull” Factor

Since 2011, more than 1.2 million Syrians have moved or escaped to Lebanon, a sister country to Syria, where already in the early 2000s Syrians “comprised between 20% and 40% of the total Lebanese workforce.”¹⁶ Both nations share strong historical, social, political and economic ties.¹⁷ In contrast to Turkey, where Turkish language forms an additional social barrier for Syrians, in Lebanon or Jordan this obstacle does not exist as even the Arabic dialect is very similar. Lebanon is the closest neighbouring country to Syria's most populous line of cities: Damascus-Hama-Homs-Latakia. Syrians who fled over the border did not have to move far, still retaining a sense of closeness of their fatherland. Beirut is only 130 km away from Damascus. The fact that in the first years of the conflict, Syrians escaped to overcrowded Lebanon, notorious for refugee hostility, and particularly to the Bekaa Valley directly bordering their former country and where more than 400,000 of these Syrians now live, suggests that the refugees were simply waiting to return home.¹⁸ Overall, the four million Syrian refugees have primarily fled just over the nearest border to their homes. A large number of them went to Iraq and Lebanon, both countries prone to internal conflict and yet chosen as a safe haven, which testifies to the notion that Syrians simply fled danger. Their initial escape was not motivated by an urge to migrate to Europe but is an idea that might have developed among better-off families with time and given a growing conviction that a long-term livelihood in the host country would be impossible.

Prior to the civil war, many Syrian households lived off remittances from abroad. In 2010, almost a million Syrians (4.2% of the whole population) worked abroad in Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Germany, Libya, Sweden and France, including 3,966 doctors.¹⁹ Out of all European countries in 2012, the two where the most Syrians worked were Germany and Sweden. Still, many more worked in the Middle East. The biggest flow of remittances to Syria was recorded from Jordan (\$513 million), Kuwait (\$348 million), and Saudi Arabia (\$255 million).²⁰ The Syrian diaspora in these countries constitutes an important factor in restraining migration of family clans to Europe.

A conclusion about Syrian migration to Europe also can be deduced from this data if another factor is added to it: strong familial ties. Analysis of the Syrian population in Jordan shows that whole families fled

¹³ S. Ajluni, M. Kawar, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ J. Rudoren, “As Others Flee to West, Most Syrian Refugees Remain in Region,” *New York Times*, 22 September 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/09/23/world/middleeast/as-others-flee-to-west-most-syrian-refugees-remain-in-region.html?_r=0.

¹⁶ J. Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage, Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 15.

¹⁷ The two countries were divided into two separate territorial entities after the Second World War.

¹⁸ “2015 UNHCR country operations profile—Lebanon,” www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486676&submit=GO.

¹⁹ “Syria: The Migration and Remittances Factbook,” World Bank, 2011, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1199807908806/SyrianArabRepublic.pdf>.

²⁰ “Remittance Flows Worldwide in 2012,” Pew Research Center, 2014, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/20/remittance-map.

Syria, comprising six people on average.²¹ Large Syrian families form clans, which in crisis situations serve as broad aid networks. Even a small Syrian diaspora that lived in Europe before the current migration crisis most probably attracted more and more Syrians thanks to strong familial ties and loyalty, even between collateral relatives with minor blood relations within a single clan. The newcomers could count on even very loosely related compatriots' help. It can therefore explain why many Syrian refugees chose to apply for asylum in Germany and Sweden in 2014 and 2015, since these two countries had already hosted the largest number of Syrians in Europe.

Ideology and Values

Worldview and attitude towards religion can bear on the integration potential of Syrian refugees in culturally different societies, since they shape social attitudes. In this respect, Syrian society is also divided along social class strata, where the roughly richer part culturally resembles post-communist Eastern European societies, while the poorer part may be more traditional.

Syria, like Iraq or Egypt, has 50 years of a socialist legacy. In that time, religion was largely marginalised, pushed out of the public sphere (economy, politics, culture or law) into the private one and related to personal status and customs.²² Syria and Iraq had instilled a socialist state order to retain unity of power in their fragmented, ethnically and religiously diverse societies.²³ Syria was different from Iraq, where a Sunni minority ruled over a Shia-dominated society, in that it was an Alawi minority who formed the ruling elite in a predominantly Sunni society. Alawites have today become synonymous with the Assads and their rule, but regardless of the political events of past years the core of Alawi religious doctrine is pluralism and diversity,²⁴ which differentiates it from extreme Sunni fundamentalism. This differentiation is important because it partially explains the support of religious minorities in Syria (around 35% of the population) for the Alawi authorities. This long term, forced secularism and socialist legacy impacts Syrians' worldview and divides society: the middle class are secularised and often tilt to the left, while the lower class is more religious and traditional. This often natural division may tend to be stronger in Syria than in other societies, but it does not necessarily divide the Syrian refugees along sectarian lines. All denominations and nations fall victim to the war in Syria.²⁵

The 2010–2014 World Values Survey has found that the level of social traditionalism in some post-socialist Arab countries—Iraq or Algeria—is close to that of some European countries, i.e., Poland or Ireland, while in Lebanon it is even lower.²⁶ The Christian Welzel cultural map shows that the biggest cultural differences exist between, on the one hand, African and Muslim societies, where traditional and existential values predominate, and Protestant Europe on the other, characterised by the prevalence of secular-rational and self-expression values. Even if studies on values cannot bring certain results when it comes to the preference of traditional or secular-rational values, some European societies, such as Poland's, show features more similar to those of post-socialist Muslim societies than to Protestant European ones. Arab-Muslim and European societies are not monolithic entities that in their entirety prefer different values. The multitude of Arab attitudes (from secular-rational Lebanese to traditional Qataris) and European preferences (from secular rational Swedes to traditional Maltese) is vast and not specific to one culture.

²¹ "Syria: Podstawowe informacje demograficzno-migracyjne," UdsC, <http://udsc.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Syria-podstawowe-informacje-demograficzno-migracyjne.pdf>.

²² S.J. Al-Azm, "The 'Turkish Model': A View from Damascus," *Turkish Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2011, p. 634.

²³ A majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims (65–70%), followed by Alawis (more than 10%), Christians from Eastern and Western churches (about 10%), Druze, Ismaili, and others. Ethnically, they are mostly Arabs but also Kurdish, Circassian, Armenian and Turkmen.

²⁴ L. Goldsmith, "'God Wanted Diversity': Alawite Pluralist Ideals and their Integration into Syrian Society 1832–1973," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 40, iss. 4, October 2013, pp. 392–409.

²⁵ "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," Human Rights Council, 13 August 2015, www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session30/Documents/A.HRC.30.48_AEV.pdf.

²⁶ "WVS6," 2015, www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp.

The Richer, Skilled and Educated Reach Europe

Of the many lines of divisions that cut through Syrian society, including the refugees, Europe has been receiving the richer, more skilled, educated, and hence, more liberal part of it. OECD's recent analysis concludes that Syrian refugees are more skilled than other national groups in the current influx to Europe or previous refugees in the last large influx in the 1990s, that is, those from the former Yugoslavia.²⁷ Those who have reached European borders are also the better off who could afford a trip costing thousands of euros after having earned it, most probably, through labour on the black market in Turkey. On average, Syrians present a spectrum of social attitudes close to Catholic European and post-socialist societies, which does not invalidate their potential for integration. The median age of a Syrian asylum applicant in the EU last year was 23 years. The young but working age of refugees gives large formative and integrative possibilities.

On the other hand, more than 90% of Syrians still remain in the Middle East, both urban and rural, richer and poorer, more and less skilled. Thanks to cultural and economic ties, the refugees in Jordan and Lebanon have greater potential for integration there than refugees do in Turkey, although Lebanon is particularly strained by their overwhelming presence. In policy terms, it is futile to prioritise countries hosting Syrian refugees. All three of them—Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan—have different problems but all need urgent and simultaneous help.

The European Union's preference for singling out Turkey as the country in greatest need of help and the one with which the EU will cooperate more closely does not send a good signal to Lebanon and Jordan, who, given their size, are at least equally overburdened. As a next step, the EU, in cooperation with the Arab League, should create a "Learn and Work" fund for Syrian refugees in all three host-countries. Thematically, education is of utmost importance as the lack of it could lead to a whole generation of undereducated Syrians. With assistance, the labour markets in all three countries present opportunities for refugee integration in terms of market niches, competitiveness, economic activism and entrepreneurship. A European-Arab financial joint venture should not directly coordinate the programme on the ground but rather delegate it to specialised agencies, such as the UNHCR, UNESCO, Norwegian Refugee Council, etc. If the level of education is not improved, the refugees are still refused the right to work, UNHCR and NGOs continue to receive insufficient funds and the war in Syria shows no sign of waning, more and more but also poorer and more unskilled Syrians will make their way to Europe.

²⁷ OECD, "Is this humanitarian migration crisis different?," *Migration Policy Debates*, September 2015, www.oecd.org/els/mig/Is-this-refugee-crisis-different.pdf.