

> Note on the Integration of Urban (or Non-Camp) Refugees: The Case of Syrians in Turkey (and Lebanon and Jordan)

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Over the past few decades, many countries and their cities have been considerably affected by the arrivals of migrants and refugees. However, not all countries and cities are affected equally. Some of them seem to be affected more than others. Some are mainly affected by the arrivals of labour migrants, the others are affected by the flows of refugees. There are also major differences in the adaptation responses between cities facing with different migrant and refugee profiles. Therefore, it is important to understand the specific context of the interaction between the migrants or refugees and the city-related actors, institutions and processes.

Given the sudden and unexpected nature of refugee arrivals, which is quite different from the arrivals of other types of migrants, there is a need to pay special attention to refugee situations in the cities. Here, I will focus on the situation of urban (non-camp) Syrian refugees living in Turkey (and Lebanon and Jordan) with a focus on socio-economic prospects and challenges concerning their survival and integration on the one hand and social acceptance by the host societies on the other. My research and observations intend to contribute to the debates through insights on the socio-economic conditions of non-camp Syrians, their level of integration to the host societies, difficulties and challenges encountered and the perception of host urban communities about the arrivals and settlements of Syrian refugees. I argue that the open-border and “temporary protection” policies of the neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, have already reached their limits with the increasing number of new arrivals and ongoing difficulties faced in integrating into the host societies. I would suggest that there is an urgent need to create a “social-justice approach” with a long-term integration policy that targets the rights of Syrians through socio-economic incorporation and peaceful co-existence with the host communities.

Urban centers and refugee camps are the two main areas in which refugee studies have developed interest to analyze social exclusion and inclusion of refugees. Between these two main areas where refugees live, the issue of urban refugees requires a specific attention due to the fact that over 60 percent of the world’s 19.5 million refugees live in urban environments. Refugees continue to settle in urban areas in escalating numbers for various motivations; correspondingly, this put urban centers under significant influence and pressure, and push scholarly and policy-relevant research on the issue of urban refugees.

What we can learn from the cases of Syrian refugees in the urban areas of the three neighboring countries, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan? It is now well-known that a series of uprisings and protests started back in March 2011 demanding a regime change in Syria has gradually evolved into a civil war and resulted in more than 7.6 million of Syrian people to be internally displaced and 4.9 million to seek refuge in neighboring countries, i.e., Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and to a lesser extent Egypt. The ongoing Syrian crisis is considered to be the biggest refugee crisis since World War II. Since 2011, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan are the three countries hosting more than 4.5 million Syrian refugees in total. In all three of the countries, majority of the Syrian refugees live outside of the camps in urban areas like cities and towns.

The largest Syrian refugee populations are found to be in biggest cities in each country. Istanbul (475,654 Syrian refugees), Beirut (280,170) and Amman (176,419) are the biggest refugee-hosting urban metropolises. My recent study examines the policies of exclusion and inclusion with regards to Syrian refugees in three major cities, Istanbul, Beirut and Amman in a comparative perspective on their experiences of social integration

within receiving societies. Three cases of urban refugees provide the opportunity to mainly discuss similarities and differences within the sociopolitical spectrum in which how the central and local administrative policies reshape the urban refugee experiences and integration of refugees. Furthermore, the ability of refugees harmonizing the urban life and their impact on the social fabric has been analyzed thoroughly in a comparative manner.

As far as the Syrian refugee flows are concerned, the initial response of each country, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, was to issue an open-door policy. The common problems in all countries vary in degrees. In all three of the countries, the majority of Syrian refugees live outside of the camps that influence their situation in a better way. However, in the context of “camp versus non-camp debate,” there are hotly debated questions of “dependency syndrome versus self-sufficiency,” “long-term versus time-limited assistance,” and “state security/human security.” For urban refugees, the main challenges they experience are access to housing, health, education (lost generation), resource scarcity and low-paid employment in the informal economy. As the number of urban refugees increase in cities and towns, this created increase in demand for housing, therefore

high rent prices followed along with negative impact on the housing sector and resource capabilities, especially in cities like Amman and Beirut where the ratio of refugee population is high compared to the urban population. The competition over resources and opportunities was fueled by increasing housing costs; existing unemployment was deepened by the low-wage employment of refugees in the economy creating gray zones of informal economic activities. Local governments, especially municipalities of urban settings, lack coordination with civil society and international organizations and suffer from financial inadequacy. Much of the efforts are done in ad hoc processes, with limited effect in terms of scope and durable solutions. Public opinion is diverged in the sense that nationals understand the humanitarian crisis but strongly emphasize concern over the long stay of Syrian refugees. In all three countries, initial approaches towards refugees were to treat them as guests, and gradually this conceptualization transformed into a more distant labeling as negative attitudes and discontent, followed by opening and closure of the borders due to security concerns. The socio-ethnic divergence and social tensions extend towards instable societal reactions and slows down efforts of integration.