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## **FORCED MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION CHALLENGES OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN GERMANY: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011 and continues to this day, has led to a severe humanitarian crisis known as the Syrian refugee crisis. This protracted conflict has caused varying levels of violence and instability within Syria, forcing many people to seek refuge abroad. In this paper, I review the contemporary academic literature on the experiences, challenges, and integration processes of Syrian refugees. By analysing the complex and dangerous migration routes taken by Syrians, I highlight the numerous obstacles and difficulties faced by forced migrants both during transit and upon arrival. Using Germany as an example, I examine the reception conditions in the host country. I also consider the political and legal transformations that have influenced the movement of Syrian refugees. This review provides insights into the movement of Syrians across Europe and the methods used to obtain refugee status. I also analyze the changing political dynamics and the response of European countries to the significant migratory pressures. This review may be useful in anticipating and effectively managing current and future migration challenges, and in fostering mutual resilience and cohesion between displaced persons and host countries.

*Key words:* Syrian refugees, Germany, forced migration, migration routes, humanitarian admissions, integration

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According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, by the end of 2022, there were approximately 6.8 million Syrian refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2023). Managing the influx of forced migrants during the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 was a complex challenge for European Union member states. Among European countries, Germany stood out by accepting around one million refugees, while other countries were largely silent or hostile towards refugees (Shaffer, Stewart 2021). Over the past decade, Germany has accounted for more than a third of all asylum applications submitted in the European Union (Christ, Etzold 2022). The majority of refugees who have arrived in Germany have expressed a desire to remain in the country permanently (Damelang, Kosyakova 2021).

On August 24, 2015, the German government decided to suspend the Dublin process, allowing refugees travelling along the Balkan route via Greece and Hungary to enter the country. This act played a key role in securing the massive influx of refugees (Ostrand 2015). Brücker et al. (2016) noted that the reasons why migrants chose Germany as their destination included respect for human rights, quality education, and a culture of hospitality.

During mass migrations, many host countries face logistical, social, and financial difficulties. These resources are often insufficient to cope with the massive influx of refugees and to adequately meet their diverse needs (Shaffer, Stewart 2021). As armed conflicts prolong and the flow of refugees continues, the number of possible safe destinations decreases (Hunkler et al. 2022). Initially, Syrians sought asylum in neighboring countries, but by the summer of 2015, they also began to seek refuge in European countries as well. To ease the burden of the refugee crisis, Germany adopted an open-door policy, thereby allowing Syrians to seek asylum and start a new life in Europe (Thomas et al. 2015).

Heaven Crawley et al. (2017) investigated the reasons why forced migrants continue to migrate from the countries to which they initially migrated. Reasons for continued migration include a lack of employment prospects, a desire for safety, and future stability. In addition, most Syrian refugees were unable to meet their basic needs during their initial migration due to a range of issues, such as language barriers, financial difficulties, prejudice from the host communities, exploitation, and social isolation (Ghayda et al. 2016). Some factors, such as social networks, information exchange and chain migration, played a decisive role in the choice of a country as a final destination. (Koser, Pinkerton 2002).

In this review, I aim to examine the issues of forced migration and the integration of Syrian refugees in Germany by analyzing contemporary literature on the subject. The main objective is to identify the main challenges and obstacles that Syrian refugees face on their way to integration into German society. The review covers the following aspects: migration routes, political and legal changes, integration processes, the response of the host community, and humanitarian admission programs.

For this review, I used data from academic peer-reviewed articles and non-peer-reviewed 'grey' literature, including reports from international organizations. The selection criteria for the literature were based on its relevance to the Syrian

refugee issue, with a focus on migration routes, integration processes, and policy responses in the German context. I used data published from 2011 to the present. In the review, I adhere to a narrative framework but also include commentary and critical analysis. This is necessary for a deeper understanding of the issues related to the forced migration of Syrians to Germany.

### **The Dynamics of Migration Routes, Border Controls, and Humanitarian Admissions**

Migration narratives often portray travelers as individuals who have a clear idea of the country they wish to migrate to. However, many forced migrants may not have a specific idea of their destination; their primary motivation for migrating is the need for safety. Sometimes the first stop becomes the final destination, while other times it serves as a temporary respite before continuing the journey in search of a place where they can stay longer (Shaffer et al. 2018).

#### **Political Cooperation, Migration Routes, and Border Controls**

Before 2015, Syrians seeking asylum could only enter Europe legally or via a dangerous route from North Africa to Italy (Connor 2016). The transit migration route through Libya and the Central Mediterranean was perceived as the most dangerous for migrants trying to reach Europe. This claim is supported by Župarić-Ilić and Valenta, who note that during this period, the media often described tragic drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, as well as cases of human trafficking, exploitation, and slavery (Župarić-Ilić, Valenta 2019). However, while Župarić-Ilić and Valenta (2019) thoroughly investigated the importance of the Balkan Corridor for Syrian refugees, their analysis focused on regional dynamics and ignored broader geopolitical factors influencing migration policies.

Under the Dublin Protocol, asylum seekers are obliged to remain in the first European Union country they enter (Pearlman 2020). In August 2015, in response to increasing pressure on Hungary and Greece, Germany announced the suspension of the Dublin Protocol for asylum seekers from Syria. In the same year, Macedonia agreed to lift border restrictions, allowing refugees to transit through the Balkans from Greece to Western and Northern Europe, significantly increasing the flow of migrants into Europe, of which Syrian refugees were a significant part (Connor 2016). Brücker et al. link this increase to stricter admission rules imposed by neighboring countries such as Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, as well as attempts by southern European states to redirect refugees to Germany (Brücker et al. 2020). In addition, more migrants arrived on Greek islands from Turkey, thousands of whom continued their journey to Western Europe via Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, and Slovenia (Fargues, Fandrich 2012; Heisbourg 2015).

In 2015, following statements by Germany and Sweden on granting asylum to Syrian refugees, Balkan countries declared that they could only offer temporary

asylum, as they lacked the necessary resources to provide permanent asylum and were not considered by the refugees as a final destination. Some Balkan countries opened their borders, facilitating the rapid movement of migrants to their next destination. However, reports by Župarić-Iljić and Valenta criticize the border fortifications carried out by Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Hungary, which started building barriers, and deployed military units to guard the borders (Župarić-Iljić, Valenta 2019). Actions of resistance and intimidation were also carried out in some countries bordering the European Union (Triandafyllidou, Dimitriadi 2014). Nevertheless, Župarić-Iljić and Valenta emphasize the importance of developing the Balkan corridor as a semi-official safe passage route, which played a pivotal role in the management of the crisis (Župarić-Iljić, Valenta 2019).

### **Shifts in Policy and Humanitarian Admissions after 2015**

Following the introduction of entry restrictions by countries along the Balkan route, the number of Syrian refugees began to decline. As Brücker et al. explain, the relatively stable and low level of arrivals observed in the spring of 2016 can be explained by several institutional measures, such as the closure of the Balkan route and the signing of the migration agreement between the EU and Turkey in March 2016 (Brücker et al. 2020). According to this agreement, Turkey agreed to take measures to stop illegal migration in exchange for billions of euros in financial compensation and other forms of support (Pearlman 2020). Bialasiewicz and Maessen point out that Germany and the Netherlands were important proponents of cooperation with Turkey (Bialasiewicz, Maessen 2018). This agreement influenced Germany's decision to accept refugees, particularly Syrian refugees from Turkey. For example, the 'one-for-one' mechanism allowed one Syrian refugee to enter the EU legally for every illegal immigrant returned to Turkey.

Welfens also highlights that in December 2017, the 'voluntary humanitarian admission scheme' was introduced in response to the decline in the number of illegal border crossings. This initiative aimed to combat smuggling and illegal migration while providing protection to those seeking safety. Following an agreement with Turkey, selection criteria such as marital status, education level, and language skills were established, (Welfens 2022). The challenges faced by forced migrants in 2011–2015 are still relevant today. Although much has been done, this approach has been criticized for potentially ignoring refugees who do not meet the established criteria but are equally deserving of asylum. And while the number of unauthorized entries has decreased, the long-term consequences of these agreements have been little studied.

### **Humanitarian Admission Programmes for Syrian Refugees in Germany**

Christ and Etzold state that apart from obtaining tourist, work, or student visas, there are two main ways to enter Germany legally and safely: family reunification and Humanitarian Admission Programmes (HAP) (Christ, Etzold 2022). In March

2013, a programme for the legal transport of refugees was officially launched, with subsequent programmes introduced in December 2013 and July 2014. The German government approved these initiatives in response to the escalation of violence in Syria and the severe refugee crisis in the region. Syrians were granted entry based on humanitarian grounds or to reunite with family members already living in Germany. Priority was also given to those with skills needed for the post-conflict reconstruction in Syria. Individuals with links to criminal activity or terrorism were excluded. The programmes were created in response to pressure and demands from Syrians living in Germany who wanted to reunite with their relatives. In addition, Welfens notes that media reports highlighting the plight of Syrian refugees significantly influenced the development of these programmes. These factors prompted government officials to take immediate action (Welfens 2022).

Recognised refugees, i. e., people who have been granted asylum under the German Constitution or who have been granted refugee status under the Geneva Convention, have a priority right to family reunification. These refugees do not have to prove that they have accommodation and financial resources to support their family members. Family reunification is available only for spouses, registered partners, and their minor children. To apply for family reunification, a visa application must be submitted through a German diplomatic mission abroad. To confirm the identity of the applicants and their family relationship to the sponsor, the application must include a notarised marriage contract and the children's birth certificates (Tometten 2018).

The Humanitarian Admission Programmes (HAP) implemented by Germany from 2013 to 2017 allowed 24000 Syrians to join their relatives in Germany. Initially, the refugees were selected by UNHCR, but later German citizens of Syrian descent were also given the right to apply. Welfens points out that applicants were responsible for their travel and living expenses, with the exception of health insurance. A limitation of the HAP is that it only permits first- and second-degree relatives, who were not eligible for 'privileged family reunification' status (Welfens 2022). This approach limited broader family reunification initiatives.

Pearlman explains that unauthorized arrivals are covered by the 2007 Refugee Procedure Act, which requires them to be taken to the nearest reception center and distributed among the federal states according to quotas (Pearlman 2020). Upon arrival in Germany, refugees are registered by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) or by German border police officers. After registration, regional authorities issue refugees with a landing document, which serves as a temporary identity card and provides access to essential public services, including food, housing, and medical care (BAMF 2023). Beinhorn et al. detail how refugees are distributed across the federal states of Germany according to the Königsteiner Schlüssel quota system, with each state parliament setting its own conditions for the admission of newcomers. The BAMF regulates the asylum procedure, which ends with the granting of one of several statuses: the right to asylum, refugee status, subsidiary, or temporary protection (Beinhorn

et al. 2019). Brücker et al also reveal that depending on the status granted, different types of residence and work permits are issued. Individuals whose applications are rejected may be given a temporary reprieve, or they may be asked to leave the country immediately (Brücker et al. 2020).

Germany's federal states are responsible for providing housing and social services for refugees, with most of the costs covered by the national budget. According to Brücker et al., upon arrival in the designated federal state, refugees are first placed in reception facilities and then provided with permanent accommodation (Brücker et al. 2020). To accommodate migrants, including Syrians, in 2015, Germany set up temporary shelters, including in sports halls and municipal facilities. All asylum seekers had access to shared accommodation in these facilities (Pearlman 2020). In addition to housing and other forms of assistance, newly arrived refugees were entitled to a monthly cash allowance of 327 euros (Brücker et al. 2020). Although Brücker et al. (2020) conducted a thorough analysis of the integration possibilities for Syrian refugees in Germany, they seem to have underestimated the persistent socio-economic challenges faced by the refugees. The issue of persistent systemic barriers requires further investigation. Pearlman (2020) emphasizes that refugees' support programs in the host country and their socio-economic status significantly influence their experience of adaptation and integration into the new society. These two factors play a crucial role in how refugees perceive and experience the resettlement process, as well as their opportunities for economic and social success in the new country. However, in addition to general policies and the socio-economic status of refugees, it is essential to consider the individual circumstances and needs of each refugee, as well as other significant factors beyond government intervention.

### **Host Community**

Cultural differences between refugees and the host communities raise a number of issues for both the refugees themselves and the community. Kibreab argues that these differences are crucial to understanding the dynamics and consequences of migration (Kibreab 2004). Host communities often grapple with social, cultural, environmental, and financial uncertainties when hosting refugees. Shaffer and Stewart emphasize that refugees often bring their own rituals, traditions, and beliefs, which can be perceived as a threat to cultural integrity (Shaffer, Stewart 2021). The situation can be exacerbated by populist statements in the media that portray refugees as individuals seeking to exploit the compassion of the host side for their own gain. Government policies can either exacerbate or mitigate such hostility (Brell et al. 2020). In this context, Albarosa and Elsner examine the impact of the sudden influx of a considerable volume of asylum seekers on social cohesion and trust within the German context. Their analysis reveals that while there was a limited impact on social cohesion and trust following the arrival of asylum seekers, there was a marked increase in violent incidents against asylum seekers, particularly in regions characterized by low employment rates and significant support for far-right political groups (Albarosa and Elsner 2023).

In 2015, Germany faced its largest migration influx since World War II. The German government's decision to open its doors to refugees sparked a serious debate within the country. Opinions differed on how this migration would affect Germany's internal processes. Anon points out that some critics were skeptical about the influx, citing significant pressures on the economy and society (Anon 2015). However, Cohen offers an optimistic perspective, suggesting that new migrants could help solve demographic problems and alleviate labor shortages (Cohen 2015).

When the refugees first arrived, many Germans supported the government's initiatives and demonstrated a 'welcoming culture.' The newcomers were supported by many people. A year later, however, opposition to the open borders policy emerged within the ruling coalition. Following incidences of sexual harassment German women by immigrant men during New Year's celebrations in Cologne, public opinion quickly shifted. As a result, support for far-right anti-immigration organisations such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident (Pegida) increased significantly (Kanellopoulos et al. 2021). Gedmin and Pearlman discuss how the anti-refugee sentiment fostered the emergence of far-right groups. In 2019, a law was passed that made it easier to deport people who had been denied asylum. Despite these changes and some disappointments, according to the law, Syrian refugees in Germany can still expect full protection under existing legislation (Gedmin 2019; Pearlman 2020).

Amid the processes that complicated the integration of refugees, Shaffer and Stewart highlight the pre-existing ethnic groups within the host community. These groups were numerous and provided significant practical, financial, and emotional support to the arriving refugees. Within these ethnic communities, refugees formed support networks that facilitated efforts towards mutual aid and integration. This significantly improved the long-term integration of newcomers (Shaffer, Stewart 2021).

## **Conclusion and Final Remarks**

Hein de Haas argues that the movement of people in need should be called 'involuntary mobility.' They cannot stay in conflict zones as it is life-threatening (De Haas 2021: 27). Forced migration is often described as an unplanned event in which people leave their country at short notice and without preparation (Chiswick, Miller 2001). The displacement of refugees is often rapid and driven by survival instincts. While this concept is fundamental, it has limitations. Not all refugees are from war-torn regions. Other patterns of migration are more organised and gradual from less affected areas, driven by the desire for a better life, which does not diminish the seriousness of those fleeing their homes. Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis (2018) note that any type of migration involves complex interplay of political, social, and economic motivations, which

can change over time and space. These issues are often linked to socioeconomic crises and the deterioration of living conditions due to war. Nevertheless, the search for safety remains a primary motivating factor for forced migration. This flight can take various forms: traditional asylum-seeking through smuggling routes, seeking asylum through embassies or approved asylum centers with the help of international organisations, seeking asylum through services provided by religious centers, seeking a destination country through employment and education contracts, and family reunification.

Germany's response to the refugee crisis, including humanitarian admission programs and integration policies, has shown significant progress in managing the influx of refugees. However, the persistent socio-economic challenges and the need for more comprehensive policies to address individual circumstances remain crucial areas for further research. Overall, understanding the multifaceted dynamics of Syrian migration to Germany offers valuable insights for future policy-making and the effective management of forced migration.

In this review, I have examined various aspects of Syrian migration to Germany. However, it is important to note that existing studies have mainly focused on Syrian migration after 2011, overlooking the history of Syrian displacement and migration prior to this period. A deeper examination of the multifaceted Syrian migration flows prior to 2011 can provide a more nuanced understanding of the historical context that has significantly influenced the contemporary discourse on forced migration. Incorporating these additional layers of analysis will allow scholars to enrich the existing literature and contribute to a more comprehensive study of the multifaceted dynamics of Syrian migration to Germany.

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