

Syrian refugee-led organisations in Berlin

Jennifer Wood, Evan Easton-Calabria and Yahya Alaous

Many of the approximately 50,000 Syrian refugees living in Berlin continue to depend largely on State assistance; some refugees have also created and found additional support in active, vibrant community initiatives.

Refugees in Germany receive considerable State support. Those whose asylum applications are accepted are assigned to a local city or town, gain temporary residency and begin the integration process. Although new arrivals in 2015 were initially housed in school gyms and other emergency shelters, there are now longer-term refugee hostels and continuing efforts to help refugees find apartments of their own.

Once residency has been established or looks likely, refugees attend an integration course to learn the language and culture, and have their first meeting at a job centre to learn about employment prospects. Unemployed refugees receive a monthly sum to cover living costs. Refugees receive support from the municipality with local orientation, logistics such as transportation and medical resources, and access to organisations and clubs. However, finding a job without recognised qualifications or German language skills is difficult; so too is finding decent housing – already an acute problem in Berlin for low-income earners, even before taking into consideration the needs of refugee families.

Despite the wide-ranging support provided by State agencies, gaps in services exist and, in many cases, unmet needs are addressed by grassroots initiatives found across the country. Hundreds of projects, networks and organisations exist, almost all of which have formed since 2015.

Initially, grassroots support by Syrians in Berlin mainly took the form of helping refugees to access emergency assistance and navigate Germany's asylum and registration bureaucracy. In the early days of high numbers of refugee arrivals, for instance, groups of Syrian refugees – often recent arrivals themselves – positioned themselves at main train stations in Germany, equipping newcomers with maps, directions and advice about registering and finding shelter.

However, in the last three years there has been a shift from providing logistical and day-to-day assistance to offering cultural, community and creative support that meets refugees' psychological, emotional and personal needs. In many cases, these refugee-led efforts are now registered German organisations. Over 75 Syrian assistance

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organisations exist in Germany,¹ and our research² identified 10 in Berlin alone.

The Salaam Culture and Sport Club (Salaamkulturklub) is one such example. The club was founded by four Syrians – an academic, judge, journalist and interpreter – who recognised that Syrian refugees desperately needed translation and other logistical support in order to register as refugees, apply for jobs and learn about Germany's complex administrative and educational systems. The club also offered free overnight accommodation at the height of refugee arrivals in 2015 so that people could join the long queue at the nearby registration office the following morning.

Over the last few years, Salaam's assistance activities have both formalised and broadened. Advice is provided in the form of weekly presentations on different themes, such as how to search for and apply for a job, or how to register children in school. There is also a monthly presentation highlighting 'success stories' by refugees who have accomplished something in Berlin, be it securing employment or achieving a higher German language level. The club also now offers a café to promote intercultural exchange and a range of other support, including language practice, sport and leisure activities (including for refugees with disabilities) and intercultural and creative projects.

Differing aims

One of the most established Syrian cultural organisations in Berlin is Mada,³ housed in the cultural community centre Ulme 35 in a quiet part of former West Berlin. The cultural centre provides office and event space and the opportunity for collaborations with German artists and activists. Mada was founded by Safi, a Syrian refugee, and focuses on dialogue, art, culture and community by offering a cultural programme of lectures, theatre, films, readings and art exhibitions. There are events almost every day, including German language training and events for children and families, and many activities are intended for both Syrian and non-Syrian participants.

The idea behind establishing Mada arose in reaction to other Syrian cultural groups

in Berlin which were more conservative, as Safi felt that Syrian culture as he understood it was not being adequately represented or experienced through them. This reveals a division that is more widely evident among Syrian refugee-led organisations in Berlin: some aim to reinforce conservative forms of Syrian culture, religion and law while others aim to use Syrian culture to promote Syrian integration and the social cohesion of Syrians and Germans.

Another significant refugee-led cultural initiative is Berlin's first Arabic library: Baynetna, meaning 'between us'.⁴ Staffed by a team of committed volunteers, the library offers Arabic books to local readers, and promotes learning for Germans and 'Westerners' about Arabic culture and literature. Maher, a publisher and refugee from Syria, and Baynetna's co-founder, first had the idea to create a library in 2016, prompted by the lack of Arabic books in Berlin. He started the project in rooms at a German refugee housing facility which was used for learning and community gathering, and slowly gathered donated books. The project also hosts regular literary events – often featuring both Syrian and German performers – and strives to use these as opportunities for intercultural exchange and learning. In this way, it is "not just a library but a literary salon", according to Dana, another co-founder.

In February 2018, Berlin's public library offered Baynetna shared space to house the library, which is now open to the public four days per week. However, books, shelves and furniture need to be packed and unpacked weekly because the main library still uses the space on the other days – a regular reminder that this home, too, may be temporary. Maher, like many refugees seeking to create meaning in their new lives, comes to the library every day because it reminds him of his former publishing work in Syria. For him, books are a powerful tool for facilitating the integration of Syrians into Germany.

The success of refugee-led organisations and initiatives in Berlin in addressing the different needs of refugees stems in part from their flexible and adaptable structure. Many organisations have over time adjusted their

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activities based on the skills of volunteers and the changing needs and interests of participants. While Berlin was once thought of as a place of temporary refuge, it has now become the beginning of a new life and identity for many. Yet the majority of Syrian refugee-led organisations in Berlin do not yet consider themselves sustainable, as they are run largely by volunteers and are dependent on donations and other ad hoc sources of funding. While this reveals a need for reliable funding that will allow them to continue their work in the long term, in many ways such constraints are inevitable. These refugee-led organisations are still new, and the story of Syrians in Berlin is still only at the beginning.

Jennifer Wood jenn.m.wood@gmail.com

Educational consultant and mindfulness trainer, Berlin

Evan Easton-Calabria

Researcher, Refugee Studies Centre and DPhil Candidate, Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford

www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/people/evan-easton-calabria-1

Yahya Alaous yalous@gmail.com

Independent journalist and columnist, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*

1. www.citizensforsyria.org
2. This research was generously funded by a two-year grant from the Toyota Foundation.
3. <http://bit.ly/Ulme35>
4. www.baynetna.de

