

Syrians in Germany: individuals' reasons for returning or remaining

Ahmad Al Ajlan

Syrian refugees in Europe are not one homogenous group but are individuals and families from different parts of Syria who have different experiences in exile and different expectations around return.

Research undertaken with Syrian refugees in Germany suggests that those refugees who were employed in Syria – particularly by the government – are more likely to return than others.¹ This is particularly so for those who are older than 40, because they tend to have more difficulty than younger refugees in learning the language of their host society and finding a job to match their level of education. Furthermore, those who are able to return to their former jobs can more easily resume their lives in their home countries. This group of refugees also feels more uprooted from their culture and yearns to regain their former lives.

However, it may be harder for other Syrian refugee groups to return voluntarily and with dignity. For instance, according to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in Germany almost three quarters (73.8%, 532,799 persons) of asylum seekers in Germany in 2016 – including Syrians – are younger than 30. Most of them have received education and training in Germany and have learned German; many are earning good salaries and feel integrated into German society. Yet none of their qualifications will be of use to them in Syria. This group of refugees is therefore unlikely to want to return. Many of these young Syrian refugees who are now earning in Germany would, by Syrian standards, have been considered to be poorly educated, and would have had very difficult lives even before the war, often doing hard physical work in construction or agriculture. After enjoying safety, social and health insurance, and – most importantly – dignity in Germany, they are unlikely to choose to return to Syria.

In terms of voluntary return with dignity, the situation of refugee children – especially those born in Germany or who were younger

than seven when they arrived – seems to be the most difficult. These children have integrated fully into the host education system and cannot read or write Arabic. In some cases, refugee children can only speak the dialect of their parents (and not the standard Arabic language used in Syrian schools) while others cannot even speak their parents' dialect. In reality, many of them identify more as citizens of the countries where they now live, not of the country where their parents came from. It will be difficult for them to return to Syrian society and its education system. If categorised simplistically as Syrians due to the citizenship of their parents, they are likely on return to Syria to struggle with their studies and feel alienated. This will be in contravention of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially General Comment 6: "States shall not return a child to a country where there are substantial grounds for believing that there is a real risk of irreparable harm to the child."²

Syrian refugees in Europe are not one homogenous community, and applying one undifferentiated return policy to them all will be harmful to many, especially children and less educated younger refugees. Considerations of people's life stage and circumstances in exile need to be better understood and taken into account in order to ensure appropriate, voluntary, sustainable solutions to their displacement.

Ahmad Al Ajlan ahmad.ajlan@uni-bielefeld.de
 Researcher, Institute of Interdisciplinary
 Research on Conflict and Violence, Bielefeld
 University www.uni-bielefeld.de/ikg

1. See Al Ajlan A (2019) 'Older Refugees in Germany: What Are the Reasons for the Difficulties in Language-learning?', *Journal of Refugee Studies* bit.ly/JRS-AIAjlan-2019

2. Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 6 (2005) www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx