

Syrian Refugees in Egypt

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The steadily escalating civil war in Syria has created waves of refugees throughout the Middle East, with particularly large numbers fleeing to Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon. In addition, Egyptian governmental and UNHCR workers estimated that well over 150,000 Syrians had arrived in Egypt by October, but their current numbers are likely well above that, given the fact that roughly one million Syrians have now fled the country, with numbers multiplying in the last couple of months following brutal attacks on civilians, food shortages, and even reports, albeit unconfirmed, of chemical weapons usage by the regime.¹ However, many of the Syrian refugees in Egypt are not the typically impoverished refugees who have been pictured at refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which is one reason why only about 11,000 have registered with the UNHCR office in Egypt.²

Though some are indeed destitute, and have endured great traumas, many of the relatively better off refugees were drawn to Egypt specifically because of its friendly policies towards Syrian refugees and the fact that there are a number of informal networks of Syrians throughout the city of Cairo. In addition, the cost of living is

¹ "UN Seeks \$1.5 Billion to address Syrian crisis," *Reuters*, 19 December 2012.

² UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response," last updated 19 December 2012, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>; see also: Maggie Flick, "UN: 150,000 Syria Refugees have fled to Egypt," *Associated Press*, 18 October 2012.

reasonable and employment opportunities are greater than in Turkey, for example, due to the sharing of a common language. Jordan and Lebanon have received larger numbers of refugees, but the Jordanian job market cannot absorb many more Syrian workers, while Lebanon may seem increasingly less attractive owing to the fear of pro-Asad elements there.³ With the Syrian economy expected to contract by 20 percent this year and Syria's foreign reserves on pace to dry up completely by the end of 2013,⁴ the trickle of wealth and skilled labor out of Syria and into Egypt may impact the speed of the Syrian recovery once the civil war is over.

Syrian and Egyptian cultural and political developments have been intimately intertwined in modern times, with precedents going back to the Cairo-based Mamluk Dynasty of the 13th century. In the 20th century, many illustrious Syrian political and cultural figures lived or worked for extended periods of time in Egypt.⁵ However, Syrian and Egyptian trajectories have diverged significantly following the break-up of the short-lived United Arab Republic in 1961, and the subsequent Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979. To be sure, both countries have maintained large public sectors, comprising about a third of all employment, notwithstanding economic liberalization measures undertaken by Egypt during the 1990s and by Syria during the last decade.⁶ However, the Egyptian openness to Western commerce following its move away from the Soviet camp after the 1973 war, and its prolific cultural output, created a sense that Syria has lagged “behind the times,” according to a well-educated Egyptian who visited Syria before 2011.⁷

The upheavals of the last two years have produced vastly different outcomes in Syria and Egypt. Many Syrians who have made it safely to Egypt are experiencing a degree of freedom that has been absent from Syria for decades, even though those who came with high expectations and hopes of experiencing the fruits of the “Tahrir Square revolution” have had their optimism dashed by the realities of migrant life. At the same time, inter-personal bonds are being formed between Syrians and Egyptians,

³ Connor Molloy, “Egypt Least Worst Option for Syrian Refugees,” *Daily News Egypt*, 26 November 2012, <http://dailynewsegypt.com/2012/11/26/egypt-least-worst-option-for-syrian-refugees/>.

⁴ “Syrian Economy to Shrink 20 Percent in 2012: IIF,” *Reuters*, 10 December 2012.

⁵ Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁶ Massoud Ahmed, “Youth Unemployment in the MENA,” IMF report, 2012, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/vc/2012/061312.htm>. ‘Mark Simpson’ (pseudonym due to reporting from Syria), “Under Pressure, Syria Ends Economic Liberalization, Worsening Outlook,” *The Atlantic*, 25 May 2011.

⁷ Personal communiqué.

thanks to Egyptian policies, such as opening the doors of all levels of education to Syrian refugees. Some Syrian refugees are capitalizing on their status in Egypt, where the local media tends to support the Syrian opposition and has been open about the plight of the refugees.

A recent article in *al-Quds al-‘Arabi* reported on Ahmed al-Salih,⁸ a musician and father of two, who had fled Syria with his family to Cairo (via Jordan) after a young son was nearly shot in the head on the way to school. Salih stated that in the short term, his family was worse off, in many ways, in Egypt than they were in Syria, having arrived with only some cash from selling their home at far below the market value, some clothes, and his electric guitar. Yet his hopes that the Syrian revolution and the Arab Spring in general would produce a better future had not died, notwithstanding the difficulties his family experienced in adjusting to their new life. Salih was able to rent a two-bedroom apartment for about \$125 a month—one room for the family to sleep in and one for a studio for his new band. He said that he dreamt of using his music to further the Syrian revolution, as well as to support his family. For a time, Salih had been despondent about life in Egypt, particularly after he was unable to enroll his two boys in local schools. But he was relieved when Egyptian President Muhammad Mursi announced that Syrian refugees could be enrolled in Egyptian schools. “This was the first time,” Salih declared, “that I felt the impact of the Egyptian revolution.”

In Egypt, a refugee typically faces a notoriously complex bureaucratic culture while looking for means to earn a living. Local Egyptian organizations, such as the various Islamist and *salafi* groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and *Al-Jami‘a al-Shari‘a*, have complemented governmental efforts to make life for refugees simpler by providing moral and logistical support—which is particularly important for those who prefer not to receive handouts or to even define themselves as refugees, preferring the term migrant.⁹ Non-governmental organizations have been particularly active in the 6th of October City suburb of Cairo, where Syrian refugees

⁸ “A Syrian Family Faces the Difficulties of the Revolution by Singing in a Professional Band,” *Al-Quds al-‘Arabi*, 19 October 2012,

<http://www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\19qpt962.htm&arc=data\2012\10\10-19\19qpt962.htm>.

⁹ Zeinab El Gundi, “Syrian Refugees in Egypt: Escaping War, Facing Hardship,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 17 September 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/52716/Egypt/Politics-/Syrian-refugees-in-Egypt-Escaping-war,-meeting-har.aspx>.

have organized their own school with an explicitly non-sectarian curriculum taken from Syria—devoid, of course, of all references to the ruling Ba‘th Party.¹⁰

Wealthy Syrians began transferring their money to Egyptian banks almost from the outset of the uprising in March 2011, even while much of the business community ostensibly maintained their support for the Syrian regime in the early months, and now there are well-founded rumors that Syria’s top ten business leaders have all fled to Egypt. Moreover, a number of Syrian business owners have started new businesses in Cairo, including some who have fled the recent fighting in Syria’s commercial hub of Aleppo. The Egyptian government has tried to remove red tape for Syrian refugees, for instance by requiring that banks waive many of the documents necessary to open accounts and transfer funds. Current estimates indicate that at least half a billion dollars in private funds have been transferred to Egypt; the Syrian Central Bank has only an estimated \$8 billion total, down from \$18 billion at the start of 2012.¹¹ While Syrian merchants and wealthy individuals have not necessarily played a large role in the Syrian opposition, they are maneuvering to play a role in a post-Asad situation. Syrian opposition leaders have been holding discussions about future rebuilding, with potential funding of up to \$5 billion expected to come from Syrian business leaders, while up to \$60 billion has apparently been pledged by Gulf sources.¹² However, little of this money has thus far materialized, and reports of pledged funds have only served to prop up the Syrian pound, which has bounced back in the last month.¹³

If a significant portion of Syria’s middle class families and business elite prefer to wait in the relative comfort of Egypt until complete stability arrives in Syria, the initial stages of the rebuilding process in Syria may take longer to develop. It may be difficult for those who have established businesses or marriage ties with their host country to return quickly home to Syria, especially given the enormous obstacles some of them faced to even get to Egypt and survive there in the first place.

¹⁰ Dina Darwish, “Syrian Refugees in Egypt Target Sectarianism,” *al-Sarouq* (Egyptian Daily), 13 September, 2012, <http://shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=13092012&id=02fb8876-4b11-4530-bca5-a9e30ccaa952>.

¹¹ “Syria’s Top 10 Businessmen Flee to Egypt,” *al-Arabiya*, 4 December 2012
<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/04/253308.html>

¹² Dana El Baltaji and Dahlia Kholaif, “Syria Opposition Aims to Raise \$60 Billion for Rebuilding,” *Bloomberg*, 21 November 2012.

¹³ Suleiman al-Khalidi, “Syria’s War-Battered Pound Floats on Rebel Funds,” *Reuters*, 23 December 2012.

Meanwhile, with Syrian refugees and displaced persons increasingly fleeing air strikes and bombings, and with refugee camps overflowing in harsh conditions in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey, it is likely that more and more Syrians will try to escape to Egypt, where the political crisis, however visceral, pales in comparison to the conditions prevailing in Syria today.

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