

Beyond Europe

Routes, destinations, and challenges faced by Syrian refugees seeking asylum outside of Europe

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Introduction

Most Syrians seeking asylum in Europe arrived in 2015. Since then, increasingly restrictive policies have been put in place in order to contain the movement of refugees and other migrants to Europe. However, the lack of regular and safe migration pathways for Syrians leaves them exposed to life-threatening conditions from the very start of their journey. Increasing costs, growing risks, and vulnerability to detention, are among the reasons why many Syrians have left for other destinations beyond the Middle East and Europe. Only a few options remain available: Malaysia, Sudan, and Haiti are the sole countries that do not require Syrian nationals to have an entry visa. In addition, humanitarian visa schemes and other forms of temporary protection mean Syrian refugees are now displaced across the world.

While the media coverage has focused on the challenges faced by Syrians in neighbouring Middle Eastern countries and en route to Europe, the journeys and experiences of Syrians seeking asylum elsewhere remain poorly documented. Syrians who take 'unusual' routes to different destinations experience similar challenges to those seeking asylum in the EU and surrounding countries, but have received little attention and assistance. Even those who were able to successfully receive some form of protected status elsewhere may have faced dangerous journeys to reach their destination, often becoming vulnerable to abuse and detention. This feature article traces alternative paths taken by Syrians to destinations outside of Europe and the Middle East, and examines the conditions they face throughout their journey and upon arrival.

If not Europe, where?

Sudan

Sudan has been facing a severe humanitarian crisis since 2003, marked by protracted armed conflict, internal displacement, and food insecurity. The country currently hosts more than half a million refugees, mostly from South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Chad, and Central African Republic, and around 2.3 million individuals are internally displaced in the country. As one of the only remaining countries that Syrians can fly to without a visa, Sudan is also host to a large population of Syrian refugees. According to OCHA, between 2011 and 2016 at least 100,000 Syrians have arrived in Sudan where the visa-free policy grants Syrians registered with UNHCR the same rights and services as nationals, including education and healthcare. UNHCR's assistance, however only reaches Syrians who have registered upon arrival, an action that they are not obliged to take.

While Syrians registered with UNHCR in Sudan can access basic services for free, and are allowed to work and open their own businesses, limited humanitarian assistance and the high cost of living act as serious obstacles to financial stability for Syrians in Sudan. Syrians make up roughly 4% of the population in need of humanitarian assistance. Newly arrived families largely rely on the support of grassroots organisations, as well as on some governmental micro-

finance programmes to receive basic assistance and open small businesses. However, according to media reports, increasing rent prices and stagnant wages present major financial obstacles for Syrians in Sudan.

Syrians in Sudan also struggle to afford higher education. New arrivals to Sudan, both from the Horn of Africa and Syria, have brought an increased demand for higher education in the country. Private universities have seen this demand as an opportunity to increase tuition fees, making it difficult for Syrians and other refugees to afford higher education. Additionally, the public education system prioritises Sudanese nationals, leaving very few places for Syrians and other refugees.

The majority of Syrian refugees in Sudan have settled in Khartoum, finding the host community to be generally welcoming. The presence of a well-established and pre-existing Syrian community in the capital has helped to facilitate the integration of the newly arrived.

While many Syrians have found a new home in Sudan, some still see it as a transit location. Ongoing conflict in Syria has not allowed for safe returns and, according to OCHA, resettlement from Sudan “remains limited to only specific cases”. As a result, Syrians who struggle to integrate or generate sufficient income in Sudan, may decide to seek asylum elsewhere, often turning to irregular means to leave the country. Reports indicate that Syrians have left Sudan via overland desert routes, aiming to reach Egypt. Those who attempt this risky journey are often exposed to unsafe transportation, extortion and exploitation, and limited assistance upon arrival.

Brazil

In September 2013, the Brazilian National Committee for Refugees (CONARE) announced that Syrians and other nationals affected by the Syrian conflict would be eligible for humanitarian visas to seek asylum in Brazil. In 2015, a partnership between the Brazilian government and UNHCR was reinforced, with Brazil committing to make the issuing of humanitarian visas for Syrians more efficient and secure. At the end of 2016, 8,450 humanitarian visas had been issued. The humanitarian visa does not grant automatic refugee status but allows the visa holder to travel to Brazil and claim asylum upon arrival. Only those who can afford air tickets from Syria to Brazil are eligible.

Brazil’s century-old Syrian diaspora, as well as its socially welcoming society are contributing factors to the integration of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, multiple stories indicate that many Syrians have successfully entered the labour market or opened new businesses, while also enrolling their children in formal education. The main challenges for Syrians living in Brazil are reportedly related to language and the economic recession, which has been affecting the country since 2014. Although humanitarian visas allow Syrians to formally work before a decision on their refugee status is made, decreasing wages and rising unemployment limit the ability of asylum seekers and refugees to generate income.

Furthermore, highly-skilled professionals struggle to validate higher education diplomas, leaving most unable to apply for senior and managerial positions suited to their qualifications and experience. Reports indicate that some Syrians in Brazil have opened restaurants and food stalls in order to meet their financial needs, but few are working in their specific professions.

In early 2016, the Brazilian government announced a partnership with the EU to accept up to 100,000 Syrian refugees over five years. When Brazil’s president, Dilma Rousseff, was impeached in August 2016, the new government suspended negotiations on the resettlement of Syrian refugees. Focusing on securitisation and trade rather than human rights, Brazil’s new foreign policy has motivated some shifts in public perception concerning Syrian refugees in the country. Syrians in Brazil have reported that the government’s security-oriented rhetoric has encouraged discriminatory behaviour from the host community.

Despite such examples of hostility, Brazil’s open door policy towards individuals affected by the Syrian conflict has also attracted those in search of an alternative route to reach Europe. After being granted entry to Brazil, several Syrians have reportedly crossed the border into French Guiana in order to claim asylum in French territory, aiming to be resettled to Europe.

Other South American countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay have also created special programmes to receive Syrians escaping conflict but only in small numbers and with various restrictions.

Malaysia

In early October 2015, Malaysia's Prime Minister announced to the UN General Assembly that Malaysia would receive 3,000 Syrian refugees over three years, granting them temporary residency permits, affordable housing and the right to work, as part of a humanitarian visa scheme. Only Syrians yet to arrive in Malaysia were eligible for the scheme, as they were required to pass strict background and health checks.

As of May 2016, the most recent available figures indicate that fewer than 80 Syrian refugees were relocated to Malaysia under the implemented visa scheme. In May 2017, however, the government reiterated the 'temporary' aspect of the residency and work permits given to Syrians, who are expected to return to Syria once the conflict is settled.

Given the ongoing conflict, 1,966 Syrian refugees remain registered with UNHCR in Malaysia as of April 2017. Most reportedly arrived in 2014 in search of safety. As Syrians do not require a visa when staying less than 30 days in Malaysia, many arrive as tourists and overstay their visas. Syrians who arrive in Malaysia under tourist visas and irregularly overstay, however, are not beneficiaries of the temporary residency/humanitarian visa scheme and therefore do not benefit from the same rights. As Malaysia is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and Syrians who arrive as tourists are not necessarily registered with UNHCR, many Syrians in Malaysia face limited protection, and risk detention and deportation.

While there is limited information on the living conditions of Syrians in Malaysia, available reports indicate that Syrians who remain irregularly in the country usually engage in the informal labour market, working in low-paid positions at construction sites, plantations, and in hospitality. Furthermore, Syrians who are not part of the humanitarian visa scheme can only receive informal education. Without adequate assistance, most refugees settle in urban areas relying on the support of friends or relatives who are already in the country.

Thailand

Often with only limited information about their rights and obligations, Syrians fly to Thailand as tourists in order to flee conflict and pursue resettlement to a third country. In order to be granted a tourist visa valid for up to 90 days Syrians are required to fulfil some standard requirements, including proof of financial assets equivalent to around 590 USD per person and 1180 USD per family, return tickets, and hotel reservations. Once arrived, Syrians may register with UNHCR in Thailand, but they are given an estimate of at least two years processing time for resettlement.

As in Malaysia, refugee policies and asylum procedures in Thailand are ad hoc. Refugees who overstay their tourist visas automatically become irregular migrants, subject to detention and deportation. Due to the high levels of surveillance utilised in preventing irregular migration, Syrians in urban Thailand have to avoid certain areas and constantly avoid undercover immigration officers, limiting their movement and activities.

In addition, the lack of income associated with only being allowed to work informally means some Syrians in Thailand spend more than 90% of their monthly income to paying rent. Depending on their circumstances, those registered with UNHCR can receive a monthly stipend. However, this can be as low as 100 USD per month, meaning some also rely on gifts.

East Asia

While the stories of Syrians arriving in Sudan, Brazil, Malaysia and Thailand have received some attention from international and local media, the experience of those travelling to East Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan, has barely been documented. As a result, available reports on the conditions and challenges faced by Syrians fleeing in small numbers to East Asia have focused on particular cases and individual stories.

One example highlights the case of 28 young men from Aleppo, who were reportedly stranded in Seoul airport for at least six months under prison-like conditions. Their situation reflects the strict entry requirements and lack of support for Syrians in South Korea. Government data shows that out of more than 1,100 Syrians who claimed asylum in South Korea over the last two decades, only three have been granted refugee status. This is despite stories indicating that the majority of Syrians arriving in South Korea are military-aged men fleeing their country in order to avoid being drafted into the army. In addition, under humanitarian visas granted by the South Korean government, Syrians do not receive governmental education or healthcare, and do not have the right to pursue employment in the formal labour market. Upon arrival, most engage in informal, low-paid manual work, and are consequently vulnerable to exploitation and sudden dismissal.

Japan is another East Asian country with a low number of successful asylum claims. In 2014, out of 60 Syrians living and claiming asylum in Japan only three were granted refugee status, whereas another 30 had their visas extended for humanitarian purposes on a temporary basis. UNHCR figures from late 2015 reported nine refugees and 26 asylum-seekers from Syria were in China. In early 2017, Hong Kong recognised its first Syrian refugee.

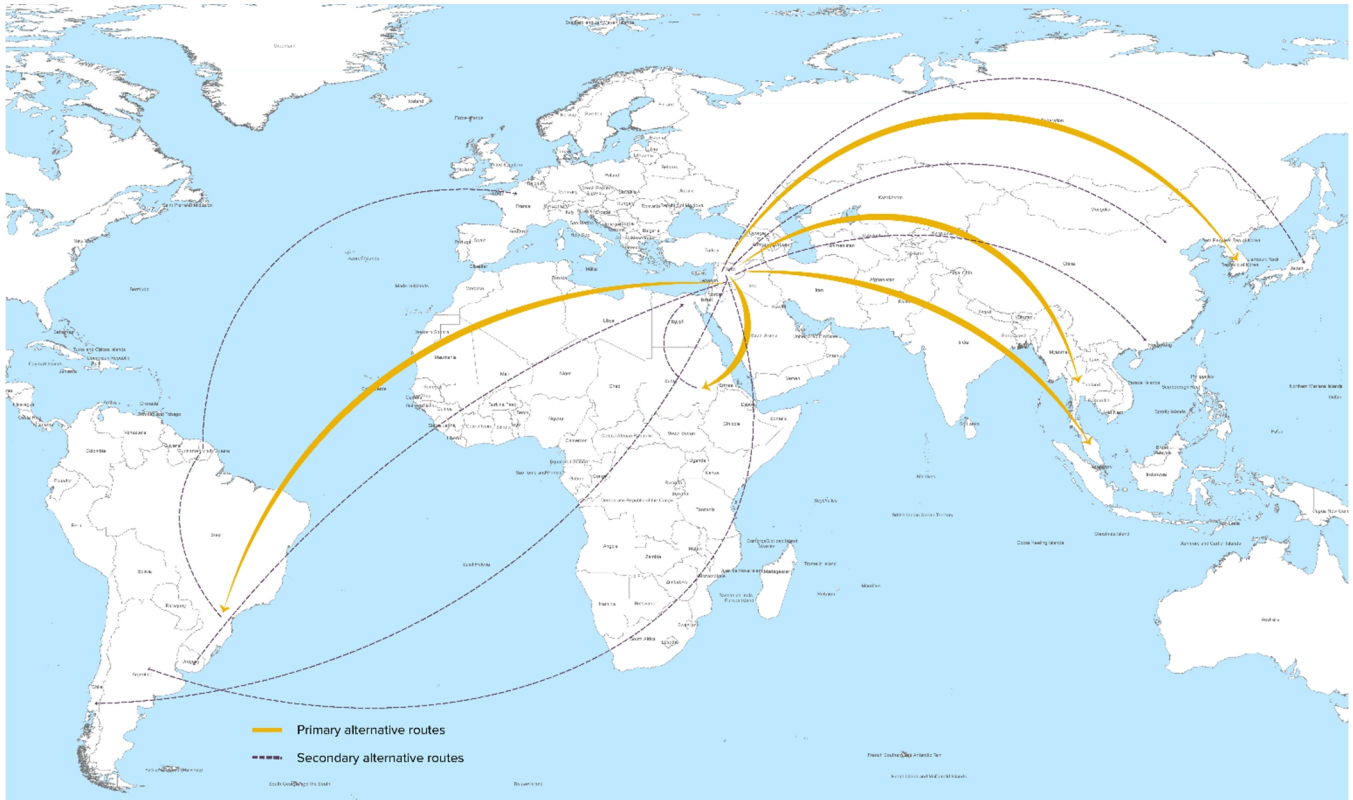


Figure 1: Map of selected alternative destinations for Syrians outside Europe and the Middle East.

Conclusion

Although Syrians have sought safety and protection in a wide range of countries across the world, media reporting has focused heavily on the movement of Syrians to Europe, and a few other high-income countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. In some cases, Syrians have begun to successfully integrate into host communities, for example in Sudan and Brazil, but many still lack adequate protection, basic services such as education and healthcare, and the right to work. In addition, the limited rights granted to Syrians under humanitarian visa schemes highlight that while the immediate protection offered to Syrians by multiple countries is welcome, temporary measures do not amount to a durable solution for refugees. In order to effectively address the global refugee context, more safe and regular pathways, as well as durable solutions, need to be on offer, not only in regions neighbouring conflict zones and major destinations, but in host countries all around the world.