Germany’s Syrian Refugee Integration Experiment

By Lily Hindy

In 2015 and 2016, millions of refugees from Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia poured into Europe, stoking xenophobic fears in many countries, and even provoking some countries to try to close their borders. Meanwhile Germany—an economic powerhouse with a falling birth rate and a historic image to shed—threw open its doors to Syrians fleeing a brutal civil war that had left them unable to go to school, work, or lead any kind of normal life. Chancellor Angela Merkel removed a legal EU barrier requiring Syrian refugees to claim asylum in their first country of arrival, famously intoning, “we can do this!” in a message to her citizens she has since stood by despite strong opposition. Despite multiple changes to EU law, from 2015 until time of writing more than 1.8 million people have applied for asylum in Germany. The majority are Syrian.

Within a matter of years, Syrians have become the second-largest group of non-citizens living in Germany, behind Turks. Today, nearly 800,000 Syrians are dispersed among Germany’s 83 million inhabitants. They are still a tiny minority, but the population has grown significantly—all but approximately 30,000 migrated after the Syrian uprisings began in 2011. The German government developed a series of systems to integrate its new refugee population, and beginning in 2015 a momentous effort got underway by all parties involved: federal, state, city, and local governments, civil society, and of course the refugees themselves. Germany’s world-renowned vocational school system is working to integrate refugees into the country’s workforce, a necessity due to a nationwide labor shortage. And numerous volunteer and nonprofit organizations started new initiatives beginning in 2015 to help the integration process.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has not yet provoked significant changes to these initiatives, it has disproportionately affected refugees in Germany given their often-precarious pre-pandemic employment situations, a slowdown in bureaucratic functions like family reunification application processing, and a general lack of socializing with people outside the home. And Merkel’s welcoming policies on immigration continue to face significant opposition. The backlash was clearly evidenced by her difficulty forming a coalition after the 2017 election, and the rise of the far-right, anti-immigration party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). In January 2021, the Interior Ministry lifted a moratorium on deportations of Syrian refugees which had been in place since 2012, a move considered a victory for the far-right even if it is unlikely that any deportations will occur.

On top of the bureaucratic and logistical obstacles, the challenges of societal integration facing the Syrian community are clear. For many Germans, integration means assimilation, while many Syrians are hoping to maintain their strong traditions from home. As in other European countries, the Muslim veil for women is a flashpoint, with Germans and Syrians alike conceding that women who refuse to stop wearing the veil are often seen by Germans as unwilling to embrace their new home, and will be considerably limited in their employment opportunities. Some Syrians feel frustrated at what they consider the patronizing attitudes of Germans who assume they have nothing to learn from the newcomers, but plenty to teach them (one interviewee called it a “one-way conversation”). And, of course, there is the question of who will return to Syria and when.

This report is an exploration of Germany’s effort to systematically integrate its refugee population, with a particular focus on the Syrian community. The report is not meant to provide a comprehensive overview of the services being offered, or to generalize on the widely varied experiences of refugees. Instead, it offers a peek into the experiences of some of the people and institutions currently involved in these early stages of Syrian refugee integration in Germany, particularly regarding employment, but also other
aspects and expectations of societal integration. It is based on site visits in the spring of 2018 to integration classes, vocational schools, places of employment, refugee housing, private homes, and nonprofit organizations hosting programs for refugees in Berlin, the German capital and largest city, as well as the Bavarian city of Würzburg and town of Kaufbeuren.

The report focuses on employment because one of the most common fears voiced by critics of Merkel’s open-door policy for refugees has been that supporting them will be a drag on the German economy, and that they will not be able to integrate into the workforce. But with tens of thousands of refugees already enrolled in integration classes at the country’s reputable vocational schools, it is clear that government authorities are purposefully laying out a path to employment for the new members of their society. Indeed, annual survey data collected by the German government on the refugee population that arrived between 2013 and 2016 shows that almost half found steady employment within five years after arrival.9 The number of refugees entering tradecraft apprenticeships increased 140 percent in 2018, though the COVID-19 crisis may prevent some companies from hiring their apprentices full-time, which could affect their residency status.10

After a brief look at Germany’s earlier experiences with large influxes of immigrants, the report examines several aspects of Syrian integration into the German economy and society, particularly workforce integration via Germany’s robust network of vocational schools and integration classes, with a focus on the case of Bavaria; other routes to employment, such as through low-skill jobs, higher education, and program efforts by civil society and volunteer organizations; and societal integration, with a special look at some of the common threads in conversations with Germans and Syrians about how they are learning to live together. Taken together, the report offers an account of what a determined government can accomplish if it commits to a policy of welcoming a massive influx of refugees. While Germany’s experience so far is checked, on the most important counts, it has been a success. Fears that refugees would spur an increase in terrorism proved unwarranted. So did worries that the refugee influx would derail Germany’s economy. Despite the tensions and setbacks detailed in this report, Germany has managed to reap national benefits from a welcoming policy, implemented despite major political, economic, and social risks.

**Learning from Past Mistakes**

Germany has experienced large influxes of immigrants before, but it has never made such a concerted effort at integrating them into the population. Merkel has said that the country should learn from mistakes made in the past, largely referring to its experience with Turkish immigration.11 In 1961, facing a labor shortage, Germany signed a contract with Turkey to bring in hundreds of thousands of “guest workers,” but offered no German language courses or vocational training to help improve their skills. German officials mistakenly assumed that the workers would return home after their contracts finished, but instead many brought their families and stayed even as Germany entered an economic recession in the 1970s. Turks wound up clustering in certain neighborhoods (Kreuzberg and Neukölln in Berlin are two of the most well-known), and the roughly 2.5 million people with Turkish background in Germany were deemed by a study in 2009 to be the “least integrated” minority in the country due to higher levels of unemployment and lower educational attainment than other populations.12

The Turkish population has faced discrimination by Germans for their so-called “migration background” even though many were born in Germany and have never lived outside of the country. The bias has been reflected in studies showing that employers will select a German over a Turkish or Arabic name between two equally qualified job applications, and that teachers tend to give a lower grade to equivalent papers written by non-Germans than those by students with German names.13 Journalist Ferda Ataman, one of many first-generation Germans whose parents immigrated from Turkey, recently published the book “Ich bin von hier. Hört auf zu fragen!” (“I’m From Here. Stop Asking!”).14
The experience of Turks in Germany looms large for today’s Syrians and their efforts to assimilate. During a community language exchange session in the town of Kaufbeuren, a Syrian resident explained, “I think the government doesn’t want the Turkish style, they want us decentralized… the government wants the Syrians everywhere. Not one million in one city, and no Syrians in another city.” A German resident chimed in: “We don’t want the danger of parallel societies” (a phrase commonly used by Germans in reference to the integration process).

So with the recent influx, the German government developed a series of new systems to better integrate the refugee population – though as time passes it is evident that some of these policies need to be tweaked. For example, no matter which border they cross to enter the country, federal authorities “fairly distribute” all refugees throughout Germany’s sixteen states using a calculation of the states’ tax revenue and population. Refugees are then prohibited from freely choosing to move from their placement for at least three years (with some variation depending on the asylum seeker’s country of origin and status, and on state and federal authorities). A number of the refugees interviewed for this report had moved from their assigned place of residence due to unwelcoming neighbors and/or inability to find a job or adequate housing. A 2020 report by the Institute of Labor Economics (IZA) analyzing data from an annual German government survey of refugees recommends a change. It found that the current policy comes “at a significant cost for subsequent integration outcomes for those refugees placed in worse [economically] performing and less welcoming regions.” Other systems seem to be beneficial for all involved. All Syrian children with asylum status are eligible for government-provided schooling. Many teenage and adult refugees are currently enrolled in government-run “integration courses” which focus mainly on German language instruction but also include modules on the country’s history, law, and cultural norms. There is a plethora of public information for refugees to help them navigate the German bureaucracy.

Experiences vary between states and localities depending on politics and the local population. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (known by its German acronym BAMF) is the first point of official contact for all refugees, processing asylum applications and administering asylum, welfare, and unemployment benefits. State and local governments are responsible for maintaining initial reception centers and administering health care, education, and housing needs. Volunteers and civil society often fill the gaps to make sure these more quotidian needs are being met, but that varies widely across the country. The former East Germany, where per capita GDP lags behind the West by 27 percent and anti-immigrant sentiment seems to be strongest (based on AfD support), hosts fewer refugees than the former West Germany and Berlin (which is located in the east). In parts of Berlin and some of the former West German states, support for refugees by civil society and volunteers is more robust and organized.

Workforce Integration through Vocational Training

Germany’s world-renowned vocational training system is often touted as the engine of the country’s economic success. It is also a centerpiece of the country’s first national integration law and is seen as key
to bringing refugees into the German workforce. However, for many Syrian refugees, who have only been in the country for five or six years, time is still needed to overcome the language barrier before securing the coveted apprenticeship—one of the best ways to secure permanent employment. New policies and programs have been implemented to help smooth the transition process.

Also known as the dual system, because it combines three to four days of on-the-job skills training with one or two days of theoretical classroom-based learning each week, students enter vocational training as a route into employment in trades including gastronomy, watchmaking, geriatric care, and auto mechanics. The vocational school administrators interviewed for this report said that the popularity of vocational education has decreased among German youth as more importance is placed on going to university. They hope refugees will soon begin to fill the void, and statistics show that they already are—in 2017, more than one in ten apprentices in the non-trade sector in Bavaria was a refugee.

The integration law, which entered into force in August 2016, stipulates that those refugees who find a firm to employ them may not be deported during the three-year vocational training period. If the trainee is offered a permanent position after the training period, he or she will be granted a two-year residence permit. The law also eliminated the age limit of twenty-one because refugees tended to be older. The so-called “3+2 rule” and lack of age restriction makes the apprenticeship a prized opportunity for the increased numbers of refugees, and many interviewed for this report spoke of it as a goal after improving their language skills.

However, that will take time. As evidenced by an intergovernmental survey of German employers, language skills among refugees generally were not yet at the desired level in 2018. Most had been in the country for just two or three years, so it is no surprise that more language training was needed. An English teacher at a vocational school in Würzburg said in an interview in 2018 the companies “desperately need people, but most of those refugees or asylum seekers are not really ready—language is still a problem and also they do not have the skills.” So vocational schools were being tasked with offering vocational language training to speed up the labor integration process.

Another piece of the national integration law was to increase the number of mandatory, cost-free “integration courses” being offered. Since 2005, German immigration law has required all immigrants from non-European Union countries to participate. The courses include 600 hours of German language instruction and a sixty-hour “orientation course” including information on German law, history, culture, and values. In 2010, demand for integration courses was already outstripping supply, and there were only 140,000 students. By 2016, that number had almost doubled to 246,125, just under half of whom were Syrian.

At Hörgeräte Baur, a hearing aid center in the historic district of the Bavarian town of Kaufbeuren, twenty-one-year-old Wael Kojo from Aleppo was one of the lucky few refugees in the country to have already landed an apprenticeship in 2018. Kojo enrolled in integration classes at the state vocational school in Kaufbeuren in 2016 and went on to work full time at Hörgeräte Baur. Founder Steven Baur said Kojo’s German language was far above most other non-native candidates.

Challenges Faced by Bavarian Vocational Schools

The experience of vocational schools in the southern state of Bavaria is one example of how much time and energy has been invested by state and local governments to integrate the refugee population. Bavaria was the main migrant point of entry into Germany during the influx and has received the second-largest population of refugees since. Bavarian vocational schools began to organize a version of integration courses in 2010–11, when there were only about 100 qualifying students. By 2015, the numbers had risen such that all vocational schools in the state were required to host the integration classes. By school year
2016–17 there were 22,000 refugee students at vocational schools in Bavaria. Bavaria has the second-largest economy in the country and one of the largest in Europe, so for refugees it is seen as a region of opportunity. BMW is headquartered there, as are Siemens, Audi, Adidas, and Allianz. The two vocational schools visited for this report were in Bavaria, in the city of Würzburg (pop. 124,000), which made international news in July 2016 when a teenage Afghan refugee armed with an axe and a knife injured four people on a train nearby, and the town of Kaufbeuren (pop. ~45,000), about an hour by train from the state capital, Munich.

The Franz Oberthür Professional School in Würzburg reflects Bavarian wealth, with auto mechanics students practicing on the latest models of BMW and Mercedes Benz, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) apprentices using new robotic equipment, and a graphic design department that recently acquired state-of-the-art printers. The school started accepting refugees in 2014, and in 2018 there were 160 refugee students from forty-one countries enrolled in integration classes at the school, though most are from Afghanistan and Syria.

Franz Oberthür’s headmaster, Uwe Tutschku, said that the school’s first year with refugee students was extremely difficult. The biggest problem was finding teachers that were capable of teaching German as a second language and finding teaching materials for students from such different backgrounds. Many students came without any documentation at all about their age and former schooling, some came with little or no formal education, some came with technical skills already, and some left without a word after only a few weeks of classes. Funding was a problem, because “the government was not organized for so many students, and who pays it, and how does everything work… so you had to get started and nobody knew where the money was coming from.”

The state vocational school in Kaufbeuren (Staatliche Berufsschule Kaufbeuren) has also struggled to accommodate its refugee student population. They did not have enough space to accommodate the 160 students they initially took in, so they had to erect temporary classrooms in shipping containers next to the school. They also increased to two teaching shifts. School administration official Markus Schiele, who took in a fifteen-year-old Afghan boy as a foster child in 2015 and housed him until he turned eighteen, recounted stories of the constant deportation threat faced by the Afghan population at the school. After news spread that the federal government was preparing a deportation flight to Kabul, a student asked Schiele if he could stay overnight at the school.

“They are in a state of insecurity and that is of course very strenuous, very hard for them, and also then hinders the learning process,” said Schiele. “If you don’t know whether you will be here next week, why should you learn German?”

Both Tutschku and Schiele said it has gotten easier each year, but there were still challenges. Some students had trouble finding a place to live. Some struggled with disease or trauma. Both schools maintain half-time social workers, which administrators agreed was not enough. For the students who were not used to going to school, it was a challenge for them to adapt to the daily schedule and the homework expectations. The national integration law says government benefits will be curtailed for those students who refuse to attend integration classes without good cause, and Schiele said that they had arranged with the social welfare agencies for a dock in students’ monthly allowance or food vouchers if they missed too many days of school. Both administrators complained that some of the male students, particularly from Syria, resist treating female teachers as authority figures. At Franz Oberthür, the cafeteria tries to offer vegetarian options to accommodate their refugees, but as vice principal Ralf Geisler said, “Integration means come together—not to change our system for the refugees.”
Tutschku said that it was too early to say whether their students have been successful at entering the workforce, but he believed that the effort has been earnest. “We have the first refugees in the dual system but we don’t know how successfully they can complete it,” he said.

**Low-Skill Labor in Berlin**

Germany’s creative capital, Berlin (sometimes referred to by Germans as “poor but sexy”), has attracted refugees whose interests or skills don’t fit neatly into the structured vocational training system. Berlin’s administration was widely criticized for being disorganized and inefficient during the initial influx of refugees in 2015–2016, and a plethora of volunteers and civil society organizations stepped in to help out. Many in Berlin’s strong network of arts organizations, as well as in international startup companies, especially in the tech industry, offer programs specifically for refugees. Very few have been accepted into university programs in Berlin. In addition, many Syrians have found job opportunities in Berlin’s well-established Arab and Turkish neighborhoods through family and community connections. Pop into any of the Arab restaurants, cafes, and pastry shops dotting the famous Sonnenallee street in Neuköln and you are likely to find at least one Syrian refugee among the employees, if not even among the owners.

Not too far up the road, a refugee-run Syrian restaurant called Kreuzberger Himmel (‘Kreuzberg Sky’) opened in early 2018 thanks to the help of the “Be an Angel” refugee support organization that was founded in 2015 by a group of German journalists, marketing specialists, and artists. The so-called “gastronomic integration project” serves up authentic Syrian specialties in a simply decorated space with photos of Aleppo lining the walls. It offers apprenticeships and internships to refugees looking for work with goals that are, as outlined on their website, “very pragmatic: We do not want a parallel society. We do not want paying taxes for people who want to and can work. We are looking for the enrichment that every single person who arrives and integrates here has to offer.”

Kreuzberger Himmel bartender Yazan Albaour left Damascus in 2012 and spent time in Turkey and Lebanon before finally finding a smuggler who agreed to bring him to Greece even though he was broke. His form of payment: Driving the boat.

“It was fun to drive something for the first time,” said Albaour, twenty-four, showing me a selfie he took on his cell phone from his position at the helm of a crowded nine-meter inflatable boat. “All the passengers in the boat wanted to pay me for getting them there safely, so they paid for my train rides all the way to Germany.”

**Higher Education**

Refugees from Syria are relatively well-educated, with estimates by the German Agency for Labor in early 2016 showing that more than 50 percent of them had at least secondary schooling, and 27 percent had more, if not necessarily a degree. Fewer than 3 percent had no formal schooling. However, largely due to the language barrier but also to other factors, enrollment in German universities has been low, with only 1,140 refugees enrolled in the 2016 winter semester, the majority of whom were Syrian. That number had increased to 3,800 by 2018. The government has dedicated €100 million through 2019 to help increase refugee enrollment by providing preparatory courses and free applications, and by increasing funding for assessment programs to determine eligibility.

Albaour’s friend Mohamed Alhalabi, a twenty-seven-year-old dancer from Damascus, said that Germany has allowed him to fulfill his dream of going to university, something he had previously considered impossible given that he had dropped out of school at age twelve. Alhalabi, who goes by the stage name “Wolf” and speaks near impeccable English, was accepted this year into an intensive three-year bachelor’s program at Berlin’s University of the Arts (Universität der Künste, or UdK). The teachers at
his audition told him he was “an exception as a talented artist,” so the school waived the documentation requirements. He had performed for years across the Middle East as a professional dancer with a Beirut-based company before coming to Germany. For Alhalabi, the German system and approach toward immigrants is clear.

“Here in Germany, work or education are the main things. Either you work, or you study. There is no third option,” said Alhalabi.47

Moutasem Alkhnaifes, twenty-eight, arrived in Germany in 2014 and went on to complete a master’s degree in urban management in Berlin thanks to a scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). But he realized that his case was unique. “I’m one of the lucky few who were able to go into university [in Germany] in the first place…. I was able to apply because I was able to get my papers from the university in Syria. I did leave in a rush, but I was able to get those papers with me, and other people were not able to do that. I mean, if your house is being bombed, you would not be able to go to university and ask them for a duration of your grades for the last couple of years,” he told me.48

Alkhnaifes said that it was near impossible to live in Berlin on the €700 monthly student stipend. He paid €400 per month for a “tiny room” (one of the biggest problems in Berlin, and across the country, is affordable housing), plus €100 in health insurance, which goes up to €200 when he turns thirty. That leaves only €100–200 each month to spend on groceries and other necessities.

What Does “Integration” Mean to Germans and Syrians?

Just as language acquisition, labor force integration, and housing adequacy are going to take time, the process of Germans and Syrians getting accustomed to each other as compatriots will be lengthy. Some flashpoints became clear in conversations during this research trip. For one, members of both communities complained about the paternalistic attitudes of the German government and many citizens toward the newcomers. All the Syrians interviewed said they were grateful for the safety, financial support, education, and job opportunities provided by Germany, and many recognized that the government was making a more concerted effort to be systematic about integration than it did in the past. They also acknowledged that their cases are given more attention than other categories of refugees, like Afghans and those from the African continent, whose legal status is not as clear. However, many voiced resentment that Germans were trying to shape them as entirely new individuals, instead of recognizing their pre-existing skills and welcoming what they bring to German society.

Moutasem Alkhnaifes, the Syrian who completed his master’s in urban planning in Berlin, said he felt that the overall approach by Germans was to have a “one-way conversation” with the refugees. “You just tell them what to do and what to be. You have to speak German, you have to go to the school, you have to do this and this and this and this to be able to succeed here. But I have never seen a person who is using his abilities that he already has.”

Alkhnaifes said that Europeans throughout history treated immigrants as “either evil people coming here with crimes, or people who are completely helpless.” That history, in his opinion, was repeating itself now with the Syrians in Germany. “Here it feels also the same,” he said, “like there are a lot of refugee places here, refugee housing, where people are not even allowed to cook for themselves because food is delivered every day. It’s like a free hotel service. You get free food, your bed sheets are washed. You just live and you don’t do anything. Because everybody is doing everything else for you. And then on the other hand you have people who are just feeling threatened by those refugees.”

Barbara Meyer, a member of the advocacy group Refugee Council Berlin who directs a nonprofit organization dedicated to youth arts education with many refugees currently participating, lamented the
fact that refugees were blocked from contributing their own skills and talents in Germany. In the elaborate federal system of social support, as soon as someone applies for asylum, “you get some money, you get a bed, you have hundreds of dates with the administration, but you are completely cut away from any system of giving. You are not allowed to give because this is too dangerous. So it grows a very perverse situation. German society is angry about these people because they get everything, they come, they take everything, but... they also forbid them to give. They forbid them to work, to care for themselves, to develop step by step, ‘what can I do for myself, for my family.’”

Alhalabi, the dancer at Berlin’s University of the Arts, said that he had been misrepresented by Germans who think they know what refugees need without even asking. “They say, oh refugees want this, refugees want that. And sometimes when I meet them, I’m one of the refugees, I say, ‘guys, it’s not like that.’”

Another problem faced by the Syrians is the pervasive fear—fanned by politicians, the media, and several attacks—that there are extremists among the refugees who are plotting attacks on the German population. Abdulrahman Alzghaer, a Syrian refugee from Deir ez-Zour living in the small Bavarian town of Kaufbeuren with his wife Noura and their two-year-old son Abdullah, joked during a meeting of the Deutsch Stammtisch, or “German table,” that “the people here think we are all cousins of Osama bin Laden.”

In fact, Jürgen Konrad, who volunteers with the Kaufbeuren refugee volunteer network “Arbeitskreis Asyl,” said that the first time Alzghaer showed up at a town hall and spoke up about issues in the refugee community, people in the audience whispered worriedly that he might be an extremist. “Amongst the German people in Kaufbeuren or anywhere, there’s a phobia of like, ‘oh god there might be an Islamic extremist or something,’” said Konrad.

Wafaa Farok, who came from the besieged al-Qadam district of Damascus with her handicapped husband and their two toddlers, was living in dedicated refugee housing in Kaufbeuren and struggling in 2018 to find an independent place to live because of these prejudices. Farok and her family were sharing a two-bedroom apartment with another Syrian couple in a large apartment building on the outskirts of the city.

“The problem here is the apartments. They’re expensive, and there are people who don’t want to rent to refugees. They’re afraid. They hear something bad about one person and it gives them a bad idea,” said Farok.

The Alzghaers were fortunate enough to find a spacious, modern apartment in a quiet neighborhood in Kaufbeuren, which they rent from a Turkish landlord. But they had a very difficult time finding it.

“For Syrians, it’s impossible,” said Noura. “We went to see many flats and when the owner knows that we are Syrian he says no.”

“There are so many reasons to say no,” added Abdulrahman. “We are on the welfare of the government, we are foreigners, we are Syrians. The spotlight is on the Syrian people — [people think] maybe they bring with them problems.”

Religion is very important to the Alzghaers, and Konrad said that there was an impression among the community in Kaufbeuren that Abdulrahman had become more conservative and influenced his friends in that direction. He was a leader in the refugee community, and with so much influence, some in the community were concerned that he did not shake hands with women, instead placing his hand over his heart—a common practice among Muslims—and his friends had begun to do the same. He also helped two other Syrians to open Kaufbeuren’s first halal market. Abdulrahman chalked up their fear to a conflation of religion and culture.
“I can follow the laws here,” said Abdulrahman. “But when the German people think about the man who hits his wife—it’s not Islam, it’s culture. They think all Muslims do the same. And hijab, it’s not culture, it’s religion. Not every Muslim woman wears a hijab.”

Alkhnaifes said he has witnessed a number of his fellow Syrians become more conservative since moving to Germany. “I’ve seen this kind of situation several times. It comes from this feeling that they are threatened culturally,” said Asem. “They feel they have to be a certain kind of person to be integrated into the community here—they feel that their culture is being taken away from them. And this is kind of a reflex because they feel like, okay, my religion is my culture. So I need to behave this way to maintain this characteristic that I already have. It’s not because they have better belief in God, it’s because they believe that those actions and those beliefs and that belief system will help them sustain themselves in this country. By being different.”

Abdulrahman’s wife Noura said that she had been told by multiple people, including her German teacher, that she should remove her hijab. “I think it’s difficult to have a job with a hijab. In Berlin especially. My teacher, she said, ‘Noura, you are beautiful, but without hijab. That is better.’”

The Alzghaers were taking the long view of their life in Germany. Abdulrahman was a protest organizer in 2011 and is wanted by the Assad regime’s security apparatus, which detained his brother accidentally while looking for him. The family hasn’t seen him since and assumes he was killed. So no matter how much Noura misses her family in Lattakia and wants to return, she knows that it is not realistic to go back to Syria with Assad in power. She was two months pregnant with their second child when we met in Kaufbeuren, and they spoke of a future in which their children never set foot in Syria. She said she liked the idea of her children growing up in Germany, as long as she can maintain her culture and religion from back home.

“Germany has many positive things,” said Noura. “On the other hand, for me it has—something I don’t like: it’s not in my religion, in my culture. I should have a balance between them for my children.”

The Road Ahead

Just a few years into this experiment of workforce and societal integration, it is still too early to draw many conclusions. What’s clear, though, at this point, is that millions of people have invested in this project, hoping that it will withstand the nationalistic forces working against it. These efforts should be lauded. It is impressive to see what has been done so far, even if the particular systematic methods embraced by the German government are frustrating for the newcomers navigating their way through them. The flow of refugees of all nationalities to Germany decreased dramatically in 2017 and has continued to decrease since, so, barring a reopening of large-scale conflict in Syria, there should be some less chaotic years ahead in which the communities will more easily be able to settle.

Jürgen Konrad, from Kaufbeuren’s refugee volunteer network, is entirely invested in making this process work. He sees it as a historic opportunity for Germany as a nation. He was “proud and happy” that when he visited the United States in 2015, “for the first time people didn’t ask about Adolf Hitler but said, ‘oh wow, it’s great what you’re doing.’”

Tareq Assad, who is readying his application for the University of the Arts in Berlin this fall, said that problems remain, and he still has a hard time making German friends, but he’s optimistic about the future of the Syrian community in Germany. “Germany presents for us a lot of opportunities in life. Of course, it’s home for us. The place where you feel safe, and you eat. Arabs say when you eat with people for forty days, you become one of them.”
Abdulrahman Alzghaer, who has absolutely no hope of returning to Syria under Assad, said, “we will not be a problem. If they help us, we will help to build this civilization. So I want to be a part of this civilization if I can. I will educate myself, I will educate my wife… this culture with our traditions, not separate. If I get my chances, I will live happy in Germany.”

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7 In July 2021, in response to a case brought by two women in Germany who were suspended from their jobs for wearing the headscarf, the supreme court of the European Union ruled that employers may prohibit employees from wearing the veil under certain conditions if that action is “justified by the employer’s desire to pursue a policy of political, philosophical and religious neutrality with regard to its customers or users.” Read the full ruling at https://curia.europa.eu/jcmen/upload/docs/application/pdf/2021-07/cp210218en.pdf.


Author interview with residents of Kaufbeuren during bi-monthly Deutsch Stammtisch, or “German table,” at Generationenhaus, Kaufbeuren, Germany, March 21, 2018.


Ibid.


Guy Chazan, “Most refugees to be jobless for years, German minister warns,” Financial Times, June 22, 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/022de0a4-54f4-11e7-9fed-c19e2700005f.


A 2017 survey of German employers by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs showed that “at least good” German language skills were required for about half of all low-skilled jobs, and that increases to more than 90 percent for medium-skilled jobs. Language was the number one difficulty mentioned by employers hiring asylum-seekers, followed by a lack of vocational skills, different work habits, and uncertainty

30 Author interview with English teacher Meinke, who preferred not to give her last name, at Franz Oberthür Professional School, Würzburg, Germany, March 21, 2018.


33 Author interview with Wael Kojo and Steven Baur, Hörräte Baur, Kaufbeuren, March 22, 2018.

34 “First Time Around,”37; “Freedom of Movement.”


36 Author interview with administrators at Franz Oberthür Professional School, Würzburg, Germany, March 21, 2018.

37 Author interview with administrators at Franz Oberthür Professional School, Würzburg, Germany, March 21, 2018.

38 All future quotations from Tutschku are sourced from this interview.

39 Author interview with Konrad, personal contact, Kaufbeuren, Germany, March 22, 2018.

40 Ibid. All future quotations from Konrad are sourced from this interview.

41 Author interview with administrators at Franz Oberthür Professional School, Würzburg, Germany, March 21, 2018.

42 Author interview with Barbara Meyer at S27, Berlin, March 15, 2018.


47 Author interview with Mohamed Alhalabi, Tareq Assad, Odah Bashi, and Yazan Albaour at University of the Arts Berlin, March 19, 2018. All future quotations from these people are sourced from this interview.

48 Author interview with Moutasem Alkhnaifes via Skype, March 29, 2018. All future quotations from Alkhnaifes are sourced from this interview.

49 Author interview with Barbara Meyer at S27, Berlin, March 15, 2018.

50 Author interview with residents of Kaufbeuren during bi-monthly Deutsch Stammtisch, or “German table” meetings, at Generationenhaus, Kaufbeuren, Germany, March 21, 2018.

51 Ibid. All future quotations from Konrad are sourced from this interview.

52 Author interview with Wafaa Farok in refugee housing, Kaufbeuren, Germany, March 23, 2018.

53 Author interview with Abdulrahman and Noura Alzghaer at their apartment in Kaufbeuren, Germany, March 22, 2018. All future quotations from Abdulrahman and Noura are sourced from this interview.