

## **Multidisciplinary Research on Cross-Border Arab Migration: A Comparison between Sweden and Jordan<sup>1</sup>**

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Migration is widespread in the age of the globalization, and technological advancements in transportation have accelerated the phenomenon since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Residents of the Arab world are no exception, and migrate for special reasons such as the ongoing conflicts in the region. To some extent, Arab migrants can be called “refugees” due to their main motive for relocating. In this paper, we use the term “migrants-refugees”<sup>2</sup> to show the intermediate status of people who seek asylum in other countries.

The Syrian conflict is currently the most intense of the region’s hostilities, following the war in Iraq from 2003 to 2011. Beside these, the conflict between Palestine and Israel has been the longest in the region, with little likelihood of ending. However, few studies have shed light on migrants from the Arab world as a whole, and even less research has focused on their perceptions.

Compared to other migrants, Arab migrants-refugees have particular characteristics: they share a common language, food, habits, and religious affiliations across borders. This similarity sometimes benefits Arab migrants-refugees when they move to other Arab states, as they may face fewer obstacles to assimilation; they can easily communicate with locals from the moment they arrive. On the other hand, they might face serious problems, regardless of their personal opinion on the conflict. Regional strife can lead to enmity between nations, which in turn can affect the emotions of migrants in their host countries.

Based on these assumptions, this paper investigates how Arab migrants-refugees adapt to their host countries. Why did they choose to come to that land? How do they evaluate their living conditions in the host country? What is their hope for future migration? We aim to answer these questions based on our original field research. We focus especially on Syrians.

Multidisciplinary methods also characterize this study. Based on the sociological framework of migration, it includes both quantitative and qualitative research. The study will examine general trends of migrants-refugees through surveys, and field research will provide a detailed

explanation of their circumstances. The discipline of Area Studies will illuminate their social and political backgrounds, and an analysis of their host countries' diplomatic policies will inform their current situation. Combining these methodologies allows us to achieve a comprehensive research plan.

### **1. Theoretical Framework of the Research**

There have been many approaches to international migration and refugee studies. While researchers of law and politics tend to view migration as a target of control, sociologists deal with it as a proactive issue. Both are familiar with the push-pull model, which focuses on the factors that force people out of their native lands or which attract them to possible host countries (Kunz 1973). The push-pull model originally aimed to explain labor-power movements; it was based on the interests of labor economists, such as wage and employment differences between two countries.

Sociological and anthropological studies have explored common traits among migrants-refugees such as religion, culture, language, and kinship, which could affect migration patterns.<sup>3</sup> Regarding these patterns, Weiner points out that there is little empirical knowledge about the influence of immigration control on the decisions refugees make (Weiner 1995). In addition, few studies have examined refugees' choices. Czaika is a challenging exception; his model tries to explain the mechanism that determines migrants' choices: remain at home, stay in the first asylum country, or leave for further resettlement. Czaika established the model based on the utility maximization principle (Czaika 2009).

However, the factor of knowledge about migration is still missing. Examples of crucial information on asylum include rigid immigration policies and similar cultural conditions in the host countries. Recent progress in behavioral economics shows that the determinants of refugees' behavior pertain to such awareness.

This paper focuses on the missing aspects in previous studies, and delves into the dynamics and perspectives of Arab migrants-refugees. It also tries to make theoretical contributions to the field, and avoids simply producing an ad-hoc monograph. This project assumes that *human beings make the best possible decisions within their ability and depending on finite information during a limited time period*. Scholars of this paper believe this principle applies to refugees, whom they do not consider passive objects in interstate conflicts. Based on that hypothesis, and with the aim of clarifying the aforementioned points, this study compares cases from Jordan and Sweden. These are the two possible destinations for Syrian asylum seekers, as they are well known for accepting Arab migrants-refugees.

### **2. Field Research Conducted in Jordan (August 2014)**

For the first year of the study, we carried out field research in Jordan in August 2014.

We included several categories of migrants-refugees, and conducted both qualitative and quantitative research. For the qualitative side, The Queen Zein Al-Sharaf Institute for Development (ZENID) helped us coordinate the home visit research based around their usual activities of supporting Syrian refugees. For the quantitative part, the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan conducted the survey in all the relevant cities, villages, and camps in Jordan. Our team designed the questionnaire and finalized it in coordination with CSS.

Regarding the geographical area under study, Jordan is known for accepting refugees and migrants impacted by strife in the surrounding region. Migrants-refugees from Iraq and Syria number more than 500,000 for each conflict at its peak, and Palestinians are estimated to comprise more than 3 million of Jordan's total population. These Arabs in exile share a similar culture and language with the citizens of their host country. Their residence tends to be extended over many years, though not all receive Jordanian citizenship.

### ■ Summary of the Field Research

We conducted several interviews with Iraqis and Syrians in Jordan, and the Za'atari refugee camp was our main research site for Syrians. Za'atari lies about 70km north of Amman, near the town of Mafraq, and approximately 30km from the Syrian border; it is one of Jordan's biggest Syrian refugee camps. There are also several small villages not far from the camp in which Syrian refugees are allowed to stay.

We interviewed 10 families in the villages of Khaldīya and Umm Jumāl. All of the interviewees evacuated either from Homs or Daraa (in Syria), with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Their living conditions were quite severe, and the price of rent was high for them (150–200 JD per month) even though it was less than in the city center. One family was living in a small tent in the village since they could not continue to pay for an apartment. Nevertheless, the people we spoke with said the situation was still better than life in the camps. A man who used to be a dressmaker lamented bitterly, "Things could not be worse there. For example, the floor gets completely soaked when it rains; so I found a Jordanian guarantor and fled the camp." The refugees seemed dissatisfied with the support from international organizations such as the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), and NGOs, including Save the Children and CARE, because they thought the distribution of aid was neither sufficient nor impartial. In collaboration with the WFP (World Food Programme), the UNHCR supplies the refugees with food vouchers for 24 JD per person a month. However, this was not enough, and some refugees sold their vouchers illegally because they needed cash. Most Syrian asylum seekers kept in touch with their acquaintances and got information through mobile phones.

According to the interviews, the most severe problem for refugees in Jordan is the labor re-

striction. The Jordanian government does not allow Syrian exiles to work legally. This is the clear and crucial difference compared with the rights of Syrians in Lebanon. Besides Jordan, Lebanon is the biggest host country for Syrian refugees, and the Lebanese government does not interfere in labor of Syrian refugees. In Jordan, Syrian refugees also face hurdles in terms of their children's education. Even if their children register in local schools, most classes are too over-crowded to accept other students. There are also problems in terms of children's transportation.

While most of the Syrians we talked to said they wanted to eventually move back to their country, most seemed to have lost hope. One of the men said, "We have no intention of going back. The ongoing situation in Syria is the least of my concerns any more. There is no hope to restart our life there. We want to move to another country for a better life, but again, there is simply no way to do so." An elderly man lamented, "We left Syria to escape the Assad regime, but life in Jordan is also prison-like."

### ■An Analysis based on Area Studies

Based on our observations, there are several points to investigate, one being where the refugees lived in Syria. Many of the interviewees came from the Homs Governorate, whose location makes it seem that heading towards Lebanon would be much closer and more reasonable. In addition, since the refugees complain that they are not allowed to work in Jordan, why did they choose this country and not Lebanon?

An answer might be found in the knowledge derived from examining Syria in the framework of Area Studies. The asylum seekers' preferred news channels and reasons for refuge indicated that they possibly belonged to the opposition against the Syrian government. Some even said they came to Jordan through the direct guidance of the Free Syrian Army. These facts suggest that Lebanon might not be safe for them since it is widely believed that the Syrian security apparatus is quite active there, and arbitrary arrests are also very common. Thus, for Syrians against the Assad regime, Jordan is a safer place to seek asylum, even if their original location in Syria is geographically closer to Lebanon.

The multidisciplinary approach can help clarify another point. In some authoritarian Arab countries, the authorities might influence local agencies that conduct surveys, and interviewees might avoid giving honest answers on sensitive issues. To deal with this problem, experience in Area Studies can make an important contribution to the investigation. Observing the social atmosphere that might affect the respondents' attitudes can enable the researchers to reach a deeper level of analysis.

### 3. Expected Research Development

Our next step is to conduct research in Sweden in the coming year. Compared to Jordan,

Sweden has different factors that might appeal to Arab migrants-refugees. Jordan is a neighboring country that serves as a first asylum destination. Sweden, however, is in northern Europe, far from the Middle East, but follows its own resettlement policy for refugees. In recent decades, Sweden has accepted migrants-refugees from around the world such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Syria. Most of them sought asylum from local conflicts. They were accepted for humanitarian reasons, and after a certain period of residence, they obtained Swedish citizenship. Seeking asylum in Sweden offers the potential for higher income and social status, but the country has a totally different culture and language from the Arab states.

According to the push-pull model, economic reasons have been considered an important “pulling” factor (Lundh and Ohlsson 1999). However, recent studies revealed that Swedish foreign policy, also known as “the active foreign policy” (*den aktiva utrikespolitiken*) works as another “pulling” factor for migrants-refugees (Demker and Malmström 1999).

“The active foreign policy,” which involves international disarmament, humanitarian aid and promoting human rights, has helped Sweden earn a stellar reputation for its efforts in global issues. Accepting refugees has been a critical part of this policy. Sweden has accepted a huge number of refugees in the decades since the Cold War, and about one-fifth of its population has a foreign background. Furthermore, the migrant and refugee policy of Sweden has always been closely tied to its foreign policy. In the 1980s, the Prime Ministers of the Social Democratic party declared in their general policy speeches that “a generous refugee policy is an important expression of international solidarity” (Demker and Malmström 1999, ss.34f.).

The Swedish government announced it would open its border to Syrian refugees in 2013, and that those who wanted to stay in Sweden would be given permanent residence permits. As a result, 16,317 Syrian refugees sought asylum there in 2013. Most came to Sweden via the Öresund Bridge, but some Syrian asylum seekers are now reportedly taking an airplane directly to Stockholm Arlanda International Airport. They came also from Chicago and New York with an American visa or an American passport, which shows that even Syrians living in the United States are attracted by the country’s generous refugee policy (Persson 2014).

Regarding our upcoming research in Sweden in 2015, we will work with several institutions to carry out an opinion poll. We will conduct qualitative research through interviews as well with Iraqi and Syrian refugees. Comparing the results from Jordan and Sweden will indicate the differences in perceptions and adaptation among Arab migrants-refugees in each of those countries. The study will clarify the impact of available economic resources, knowledge of immigration control, and common characteristics, such as culture, language or kinship, on the choices that migrants-refugees make.

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## Notes

- 1 This research project began in April 2014 and was funded by JSPS KAKENHI, Grant Number 26283003 – Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), Japan.
- 2 The term refers to the common characteristic of hardship faced by refugees and migrants. It also points out the existence of their intermediate legal and social status.
- 3 The other references are follows: Elnajjar 1993; EUROSTAT 2000; Fargues 2004; de Silva and Silva-Jáuregui 2004.