

Gerard M Murphy

University of Exeter

How has the presence of Syrian refugees impacted neighbouring states,
as well as countries further afield?

February 2019

This essay will explore the ways in which Syrian refugees have had economic, social and political impacts on neighbouring states, drawing upon examples from Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, as well as in countries further away, as in Sweden. Firstly, I shall place the Syrian conflict in context, before outlining the presence and situations of the refugees in these countries. The essay will then analyse the economic impacts upon these states, noting the anomalous positive effects Syrian refugees have had on the Turkish economy. The social impacts will then be evaluated, and how this has framed social perceptions of refugees in these communities. Finally, I shall examine the political impacts, analysing how the changed social perceptions have influenced and continue to influence national politics.

From the spring of 2011, the major conflict in Syria between Bashar Al Assad's government and various other forces has continued to cause mass displacement across the Middle East. By the end of 2014, approximately "7.6 million people were internally displaced and 3.7 million Syrians had fled the country," (Ostrand, 2015: 255). The refugee situation caused by the conflict is dire. Neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey host huge numbers of Syrian refugees who place an increasing strain on their public services.

Although there are several conflicting reports on the exact number of refugees present, as of September 2015, there are approximately 1.9 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey, where the majority of refugees are based. Lebanon and Jordan host 1.1 million and 600,000 respectively. Based on the Lebanese government's decision to ban the construction of refugee camps, Syrian refugees are living in host communities across Lebanon, whereas only 84% of Syrians live in host communities in Jordan, the rest living in camps near the capital Amman (Blanchet et al., 2016; Francis, 2015). Other countries in the Middle East which are host to significant numbers are Iraq (250,000) and Egypt (130,000) (BBC, 2015). Sweden is currently host to roughly 80,000 Syrian refugees, all of whom have received housing and employment assistance as part of a state sponsored integration programme (Ostbring, 2016).

Registered Syrian refugees

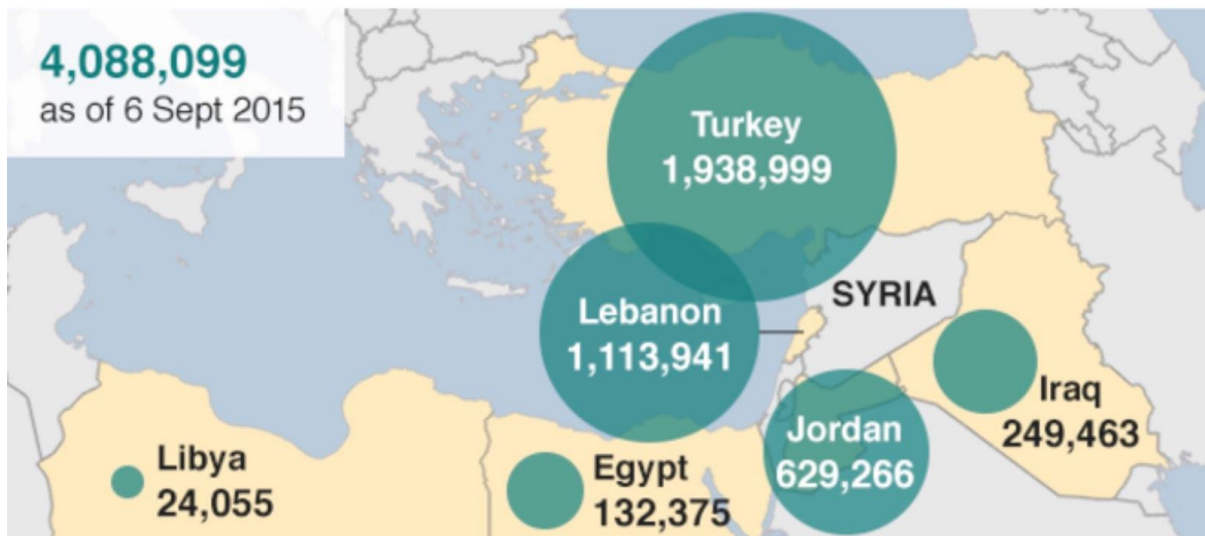


Figure 1 – Map of registered Syrian refugees in the Middle East

It is important to mention that although this essay explores economic, social and political impacts of the refugees' presence, the effects experienced by host communities are not limited to these aspects and not entirely covered by academic literature. The following impacts being analysed are deemed to be some of the most significant factors affecting these societies.

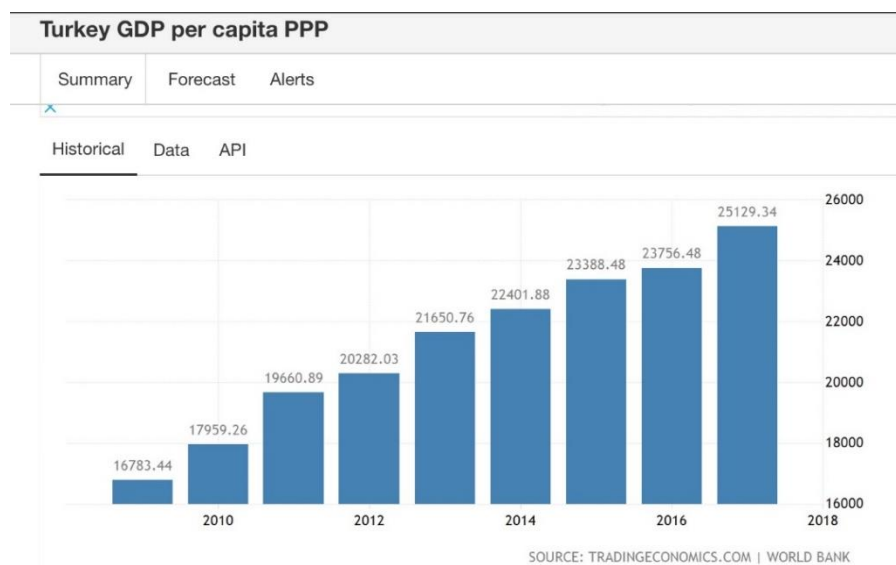
Looking at the economic impact of the refugee crisis, the neighbouring host communities have faced the brunt of the impact. Up until December 2014 alone, Lebanon had spent approximately \$1.6 billion on direct assistance to Syrian refugees (Ostrand, 2015). Despite the inter-agency Syrian Regional Response Plan appeal for \$3.7 billion in 2014, only 54% of funds were raised, which would have directly affected the food security, water, and shelter of the refugees, placing greater pressure on an already weakened society to provide for them (Berti, 2015). Hosting the Syrian refugees has led to greater government borrowing, augmenting public debt to a highly unsustainable 141% of GDP (Gonzalez et al. 2014). Moreover, a World Bank assessment claims that it will take investments of "\$2.5 billion simply to restore access and quality of services to pre-Syrian civil war levels," (Berti, 2015: 47).

Jordan has also faced similar economic burdens. Although the \$1.2 billion spent on direct assistance to the refugees seems gigantic, the hidden responsibility of the Jordanian

government lies in the public spending on infrastructure improvements (electricity, water, and municipal services). It is estimated that these improvements cost \$1.7 billion annually to meet the demand of hosting such a large number of Syrian refugees. The government also bears the cost of providing health services to over 600,000 refugees, costing \$167 million per year (Fakih and Ibrahim, 2015).

The economic impact in Turkey, however, is a slightly different story. Although Turkey has invested \$4.5 billion in direct assistance to Syrian refugees, setting up entire cities equipped with clinics and schools costing the government another \$4 billion, the Turkish economy has experienced profoundly positive effects (Cagaptay, 2013; Ostrand, 2015). The influx of Syrians has hugely increased demand for local goods and services, “benefiting commerce in the region,” (Dincer, 2013: 47). Moreover, in border cities such as Mersin and Haytay, Syrians opened 122 companies in 2013, which has added to Turkey’s economy, exhibited in Turkey’s rapidly growing GDP per capita, rising from \$19,660 in 2011 to over \$25,000 in 2017 (figure 2) (Trading Economics, 2019). Balkan and Tumen (2016) have also evaluated that Syrian refugees have influenced Turkey’s inflation rates, dropping consumer prices by 2.5% and causing prices in informal labour-intensive sectors to fall by 4%, making goods and services more affordable to the population. It must be noted that these factors alone do not indicate economic stability and equality. However, it can be argued that the presence of Syrian refugees has not entirely had negative economic impacts upon neighbouring host communities, considering Turkey’s improving economy.

Figure 2 – bar chart displaying Turkey’s GDP per capita PPP 2009-2017 (Trading Economics, 2019)



Sweden contributed \$169 million in humanitarian assistance to the neighbouring host communities from March 2011 to October 2014. In resettling the refugees in Sweden, the government developed an extensive state-sponsored integration programme and provided them sufficient housing and employment assistance. The economic costs for such are not documented; however, a recent report from an independent committee within the Swedish finance ministry estimates that the net cost to public finances for the refugees is \$8000 per person annually over a lifetime, equating to over \$2 billion per year, comparable to the economic costs of the infrastructural improvements in Jordan (Ostrand, 2015; Ostbring, 2016). That being said, this does not match the scale of the economic strains put upon Jordan and Lebanon, as the reception of refugees to these countries was not voluntary nor planned, and their states lack the basic communications to host such vast numbers.

Turning to the social impacts, neighbouring nations seem to struggle with the large influx of Syrian workers, affecting their labour markets. This is epitomised in the wage fluctuations of workers in the service and agricultural sectors in Lebanon, which have decreased by a dramatic 50%. This has largely been attributed to the Syrian refugee communities opening informal businesses and working illegally for significantly less than locals (Berti, 2015). In 2013, a national poll indicated that 98% of Lebanese people presumed that Syrian refugees were taking jobs from local people. Furthermore 52% thought the refugees were threatening the stability of the country (Gonzalez et al., 2014). Due to the rising demand and restricted supply of accommodation, rent prices have soared by 44%, affecting the poorest Lebanese communities. It is estimated that these significant changes to the social demographic have pushed 170,000 Lebanese families into poverty (ibid; Berti, 2015).

Jordan has also experienced the significant social impact of refugees in their labour markets, however, this is great attributed to illegal child labour. It is estimated that 30,000 Syrian children are currently engaged in child labour, which coincides with the statistic that only 52% of children aged 5 to 17 are enrolled in formal education (Berti, 2015; Fakhri and Ibrahim, 2015). This has had profound effects on domestic employment opportunities, especially in the agricultural sector, which is the main employment for 60% of people in Jordan. Jordanians have very publicly blamed Syrians for this negative social change, with the tensions sparking protests against illegal workers. Increasing rent has also been a problem in Jordan where prices “have tripled or even quadrupled in border zones... Refugees [have the] capacity to afford higher prices by sharing housing with others to bring down costs,” (Achilli, 2015: 2).

It could be argued that the social impacts of the refugees have had the most significant effect on neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, as it is threatening the livelihoods of the native population, affecting the poorest communities. Rent prices have also pushed local families out of their homes, affecting the poorest Lebanese and Jordanians who do not have any financial support from the government or any charities. This is clearly changing the social perceptions of the refugees, with the great potential to influence national politics.

Syrian refugees are also having an impact on Lebanon's political environment. The refugee population of over 1 million is almost entirely composed of Sunni Muslims, who now make up almost 1/3 of the Lebanese population. This demographic change holds a long-term risk to the of Lebanon's political sectarian balance. This unique political structure reserves certain governmental positions for members of a certain religion, the President must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Parliament Speaker a Shi'a Muslim, with political parties organised on a sectarian basis to give sufficient representation to the religious diversity of the nation. The significant demographic transition may be threatening the constitution and sectarian nature of Lebanese politics. This notion is also supported by a study undertaken by International Alert (2015), who found that 51% of Lebanese citizens interviewed considered the presence of Syrian refugees to pose threats to the Lebanese sectarian balance. 70% of respondents also reported anticipating threats of some Syrians in sectarian violence in their immediate vicinity. This therefore demonstrates that Syrian refugees are having a large social impact on Lebanon, which in turn, may have a profound future political impact, with the potential to disrupt the sectarian nature of Lebanon's current government.

Looking to the changed perception of Syrian refugees in the eyes of the Swedish population, a national poll in the years 2015 and 2016 illustrate their reluctance to continue helping to settle asylum seekers. In 2015, 54% of Swedes would 'definitely' help asylum seekers, compared to just 30% in 2016 (figure 3). 34% of Swedes in 2015 said that Sweden should let in fewer asylum seekers, which rose significantly to 60% in 2016 (figure 4) (Mohdin, 2016). These changing perceptions are clearly exhibited in the current politics of the nation, with a dramatic rise in the popularity of the far right, anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats (figure 5). With roots in the neo-Nazi movement, this party has "pledged to end Sweden's asylum policies, and make it harder for any newcomers to get jobs," (Calamur, 2018). Although SD are not currently in power, recent polls have seen their voting popularity increase massively in just a

year from 5.7% to 19.9% between 2010 and 2015 (Malm, 2016). With many Swedes' opinions founded in the overstretching of the welfare system and "not enough resources to take care of everyone," it is clear that the presence of refugees has had a social impact on Swedish society, with the potential to influence state politics (Audiencenet, 2016).

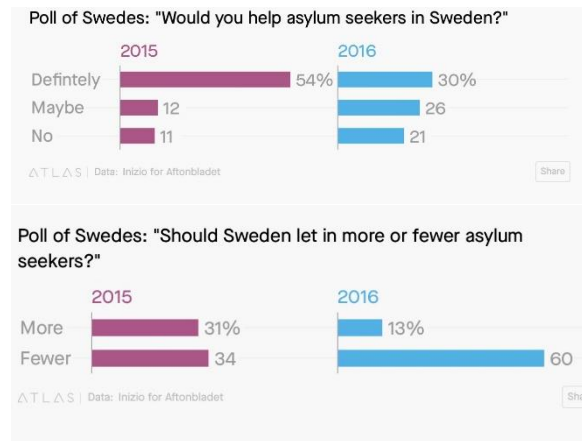


Figure 3 and 4 – Charts showing a poll of Swedes 2015-2016 (Mohdin, 2016)

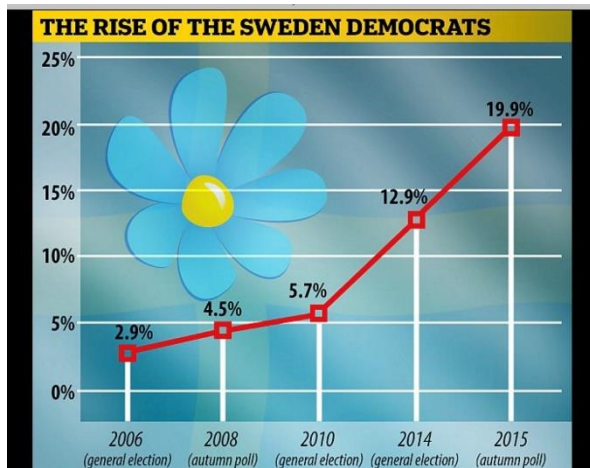


Figure 5 – Graph showing the voting of the Swedish public 2006-2015 (Malm, 2016)

One point to note is that Sweden has been one of the most open, left-wing, and receptive European nations for Syrian asylum seekers. After several years of implementing and adapting policies to accommodate for them, to see the Swedish population steer very clearly to far-right politics and anti-immigration policies could have profound impacts on the politics of other European and even global nations. This political leaning could be interpreted very negatively by any host societies who wish to accept refugees, and has already seen the British media comment on the impact of the "migrant crisis" on Sweden and the "racism... the famously liberal Swedes [who] are closing their minds and their borders," (Malm, 2016). In short, the presence of Syrian refugees in Sweden has had profound changes to the social perceptions of Syrians by Swedes, which has impacted the national politics from socially liberal to more rightward leaning. This political change may have already had and definitely has the potential to influence other nations' policies towards refugees.

In conclusion, the widespread presence of Syrian refugees has had profound impacts on both neighbouring states and countries further afield. In Lebanon and Jordan, refugees have placed

a huge strain on public finances to improve infrastructure; there are also heavy long-term financial responsibilities for Sweden. This is not the case for Turkey, however, who are still experiencing economic benefits, such as falling inflation and the increase in GDP per capita. Syrian refugees have had significant social impacts on Lebanon and Jordan, severely affecting their domestic labour markets and pushing many families into poverty. Impacts such as these have seen a common change in native social perceptions towards the refugees, which has impacted national politics in Sweden with a substantial rise in the popularity of the anti-refugee, far-right party, the Sweden Democrats. This rapid political change may have already influenced the policies of other nations towards refugees and has the capacity to do so in the future.

Reference List

- Achilli, L. (2015). Syrian Refugees in Jordan: a Reality Check. *Migration Policy Centre*.
- Arcos González, P., Cherri, Z. and Castro Delgado, R. (2016). The Lebanese Syrian crisis: impact of influx of Syrian refugees to an already weak state. *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, Volume 9, pp.165-172.
- Audiencenet. (2016). Public Perceptions of the Refugee Crisis: Phase II
- Balkan, B. and Tumen, S. (2016). Immigration and prices: quasi-experimental evidence from Syrian refugees in Turkey. *Journal of Population Economics*, 29(3), pp.657-686.
- Berti, B. (2015). The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Regional and Human Security Implications. *Strategic Assessment*, 17(4), pp.41-53.
- Blanchet, K., Fouad, F. and Pherali, T. (2016). Syrian refugees in Lebanon: the search for universal health coverage. *Conflict and Health*, 10(1).
- Çağaptay, S. (2014). *The impact of Syria's refugees on southern Turkey*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
- Calamur, K. (2018). *Why Sweden's Far Right Is on the Rise*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/sweden-election/569500/> [Accessed 12 Feb. 2019].
- Dincer, O. (2013). *Turkey and Syrian Refugees: The Limits of Hospitality*. International Strategic Research Organisation.
- Fakih, A. and Ibrahim, M. (2015). The impact of Syrian refugees on the labor market in neighboring countries: empirical evidence from Jordan. *Defence and Peace Economics*, 27(1), pp.64-86.
- Francis, A. (2015). *Jordan's refugee crisis*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

International Alert (2015). *Citizens perceptions of security threats stemming from the Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon*. Background paper.

Malm, S. (2016). *Sweden: Land of IKEA, blondes, and racism? Rise of the extreme right*. [online] Mail Online. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3349890/Sweden-Home-IKEA-meatballs-ABBA-racism-Swedish-right-wing-went-joke-big-political-player-just-seven-years.html> [Accessed 12 Feb. 2019].

Mohdin, A. (2016). *The most refugee-friendly country in Europe is growing weary*. [online] Quartz. Available at: <https://qz.com/774427/the-most-refugee-friendly-country-in-europe-is-growing-weary/> [Accessed 12 Feb. 2019].

Ostbring, B. (2016). *The Swedish Welfare State and The Refugee Crisis*.

Ostrand, N. (2015). The Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Comparison of Responses by Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 3(3), pp.255-279.

Peter, L. (2015). *Migrant crisis: How can EU respond to influx?*. [image] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34139348> [Accessed 12 Feb. 2019].

Turkey GDP per capita PPP. (2019). [image] Available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/gdp-per-capita-ppp?continent=g20> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2019].