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SYRIAN REFUGEES' LIVED EXPERIENCES IN MOROCCO

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SYRIAN REFUGEES' LIVED EXPERIENCES IN MOROCCO

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SIT Study Abroad | Morocco: Multiculturalism and Human Rights

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As the Syrian refugee crisis unfolds, those fleeing the country's civil war are seeking refuge across the world. According to official numbers from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Syrians make up about 68% of Morocco's documented refugee population. This ISP studies Syrian refugees' lives in Morocco, using direct-quote, short-form narratives to highlight lived experiences. It begins with an in-depth analysis of the refugee policies in place here, and then features reflections from refugees themselves. It highlights how factors such as the amount of time spent here, refugee status, residency status, occupation, and cultural differences affect what Syrians think of their lives in Morocco.

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INTRODUCTION

As the global refugee crisis unfolds, refugee resettlement has become an increasingly critical issue. Like many other countries that border the Mediterranean, Morocco is no stranger to this influx of refugees. Some of those fleeing intend for Morocco to be their final destination, while others seek to move towards Europe or elsewhere. Regardless, many refugees spend months or years in Morocco, settling down to a new life here.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of November 2017 Morocco was home to 4,807 registered refugees.¹ Of those, the vast majority (3,053) originated from Syria.² Most of the remainder are from sub-Saharan Africa, and there is a significant body of research concerning sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, especially ones attempting to use Morocco as a stopover country on their way to Europe.³ However, little has been written about Syrians in Morocco, though they make up a plurality of the refugee population.

My focus on this section of the refugee population endeavors to answer the question “How do Syrian refugees navigate their lives in Morocco, and what do they think of their time here?” I concentrate on how factors such as the length of their stay, refugee status, residency status, occupation, and cultural differences affect Syrians living in Morocco. I present my end results using a narrative format, because I believe the refugees’ stories speak for themselves.

¹ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2017, *Statistical report*)

² (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2017, *Statistical report*)

³ (Alioua 2014), (Collyer, 2007)

BACKGROUND

CHANGING MIGRATION POLICIES

The refugee situation in Morocco has changed substantially since the country's independence in 1956. People have emigrated from Morocco to other countries for decades, but it became an increasingly popular transit point in the 1990s when migrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, started using it as a jumping-off point to get to Europe.⁴ As a result, the European Union (EU) began a campaign to encourage Morocco to heavily regulate migration flows into the EU.⁵ This culminated in June 2013, when Morocco signed a Mobility Partnership with the EU with the primary purpose to “reinforce and implement instruments to combat irregular migration.”⁶

On September 10, 2013, King Mohammed VI announced an internal overhaul in the migration and asylum system.⁷ Numerous theories address what prompted this action, since Morocco had struggled with migration policy for a few decades. However, the announcement came one month after the Moroccan-based NGO “GADEM” (a French acronym for *Groupe Antiraciste de Défense et d'Accompagnement des Étrangers et Migrants*) released a highly critical report on the Moroccan government's migration practices.⁸ The timing also matches up directly with an evaluation by the UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of

⁴ (De Bel Air 2016, 1)

⁵ (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network 2014)

⁶ (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network 2014)

⁷ (De Haas 2014)

⁸ (Gadem 2013)

all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, which criticized Morocco’s immigration policies, in particular Law 0203, regarding the “entry of foreign nationals into Morocco and their residence in the country, illegal emigration and immigration.”⁹ According to extensive research and interviews conducted by professor Kelsey Norman of the University of California Irvine, “this timeline of events has led GADEM and other civil society organizations to conclude that the primary motivation behind the King’s announcement of reform was international shaming: Morocco despises humiliation on the international stage.”¹⁰

The month after the King’s proclamation, a new Department on Migration Affairs was created to deal with issues such as refugee recognition and the issuing of residence permits.¹¹ The Department launched a “regularization” campaign in 2014, which gave 17,916 undocumented immigrants – including roughly 5,000 Syrians – legal residency, and renewed their residency the following year.¹² Residency cards give migrants the ability to live and work legally in Morocco. According to the Moroccan government’s website, applicants need to meet criteria such as having a Moroccan spouse or proof of residency for at least four years; with exceptions for applicants recognized as refugees.¹³

POLICIES CONCERNING SYRIAN REFUGEES

Syrian refugees’ status in Morocco is especially complicated. Two different types of licenses typically apply to refugees in Morocco: refugee cards and residency cards. Residency

⁹ (United Nations 2013, 2)

¹⁰ (Norman 2016, 430)

¹¹ (De Bel Air 2016)

¹² (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2015)

¹³ (Ministry of the Interior 2017)

cards are issued by the Moroccan government, and many more have been offered since their 2013 regularization campaign. Issuance of refugee cards is more complex. Before 2013, UNHCR conducted all refugee status determinations. After the migration overhaul, the Moroccan government began to partially manage refugee claims.¹⁴ As a result, in order to be granted a refugee card, the asylum-seeker had to first go to UNHCR headquarters in Rabat for a Refugee Status Determination interview. If UNHCR determined that the individual deserved refugee status, that person would be referred to the Moroccan government's Office of Refugees and Stateless Persons, which makes the final call on whether the subject will obtain a refugee card.¹⁵ Refugee cards give people access to healthcare, education, and community services, especially through UNHCR and its local partners such as Fondation Orient-Occident.¹⁶

UNHCR supports giving migrants from Syria refugee status, which also provides access to one-year, renewable residency permits. According to the 1951 Geneva convention, a refugee is anyone "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."¹⁷ The civil war in Syria, with its bombing campaigns and chemical weapons attacks, has created just such a fear for many of its citizens. However, the Moroccan government asked that UNHCR instead give Syrians "UNHCR asylum-seeker certificates."¹⁸ Essentially, Syrians in Morocco are treated as refugees by UNHCR, but not recognized as such by the Moroccan government. According to a UNHCR employee, this is because "calling someone a

¹⁴ (Norman 2016)

¹⁵ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2017, *Statistical report*, 3)

¹⁶ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2017, *Statistical report*, 4 and 5)

¹⁷ ("Protecting Refugees")

¹⁸ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2015)

refugee would mean directly that there is some kind of unrest, conflict, or war in the country of origin. And that is pointing a finger on that country, saying ‘something is wrong in your country’...and this is a political statement. So [Morocco prefers] to host Syrian refugees without going to that political debate.”¹⁹ She noted that UNHCR supports Syrians by offering programs and money for needs such as family care, schooling, employment opportunities, and healthcare.

Still, UNHCR admits that Syrian refugees’ lack of official recognition sometimes “complicates their access to the labour market and keeps them in a certain precariousness.”²⁰ Even if recognized as refugees by UNHCR, Syrian refugees cannot obtain residency because the Moroccan government does not acknowledge their refugee status. In the past, Syrians recognized with asylum-seeker certificates could not work legally due to this lack of a residency card. A UNHCR employee insists that the UN recently closed this gap with a memorandum from the Ministry of Labor that allows Syrians to work legally.²¹

According to that same UNHCR employee, Syrians can obtain residency permits from the Moroccan government, but only if they follow the same path regular migrants go through. They must meet the criteria the Moroccan government set out for regularization, such as proof of residency for at least four years. In making this choice, they face a dilemma: though they receive a legal residency card, they cannot access UNHCR services reserved for refugees. My research engages with some of the lived experiences of Syrians in dealing with residency and refugee statuses, and their perceptions of benefits and drawbacks of these categories of official documentation.

¹⁹ (UNHCR, personal communication, December 7 2017)

²⁰ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2017). *Morocco Fact Sheet.*)

²¹ (UNHCR, personal communication, December 7 2017)

SYRIAN REFUGEES: JOURNEYS, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND FUTURE MIGRATION

Syrian's journeys to Morocco are motivated by different factors, depending on their lives before arriving. According to a 2017 report by UNHCR,

Morocco has long been an attractive destination for Syrian migrants seeking job opportunities, especially in the field of agriculture and well drilling. Many Syrians who arrived before the uprising in March 2011 had friends or relatives who were already working in the country and were able to secure a job for them, prior to their arrival, and are well integrated in Moroccan society. Before the beginning of the unrest in Syria, almost none of those economic migrants were interested in applying for asylum. Since the conflict began in Syria, they became “refugees sur place”.²²

UNHCR also reports that Syrians traveling to Morocco almost always use a genuine Syrian passport, and typically leave through the Aleppo or Damascus airports.²³ They arrive in Morocco either through direct flights, or –more commonly—by illegally crossing the border between Algeria and Morocco at the town of Oujda.²⁴ Algeria did not require a visa from Syrians until January 2015, so many would fly there and wait to illegally cross into Morocco from there.²⁵ However, the rate of migration decreased in 2016, due to increased border controls. In

²² (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2015)

²³ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2015, 1)

²⁴ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2015,)

²⁵ (Bailleul 2015)

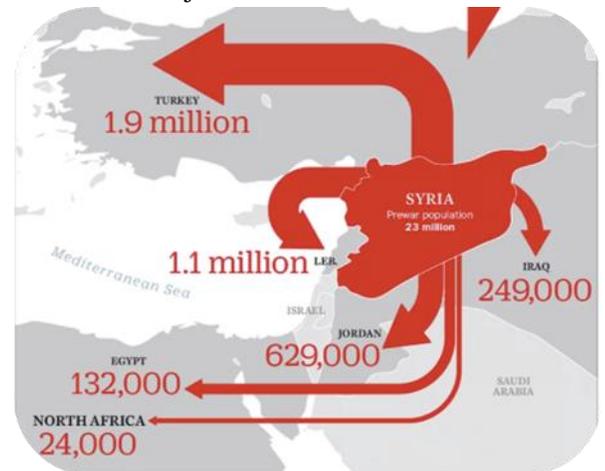
recent news, Morocco let in thirteen refugee families who were stranded on the Algerian-Moroccan border for two months.²⁶

Based on data collected from UNHCR, Syrians make up about 68% of the total refugee population in Morocco.²⁷ It is no coincidence that since 2011, Syrians have been coming to Morocco in numbers they never had

before. The Syrian civil war, which began in March 2011, generated arguably the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century. Recent statistics indicate that more than 5 million refugees left the country, after Arab Spring protests prompted a full-scale military crackdown on civilians.²⁸ The majority of refugees went to countries surrounding Syria, like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Though the proportion of the refugee population that is Syrian is high in Morocco, North Africa has received a small fraction of the world's Syrian refugees.²⁹

Furthermore, a UNHCR employee told me that the majority of Syrian refugees coming into Morocco since 2014 are from specific ethnic minority, the “Dom” people.³⁰ This community, isolated even within Syria, is sometimes labeled as “gypsies.”³¹ They are very insular, and often heavily stigmatized among Syrians. They have lived in the Middle East for over a thousand years, nomadic until the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Most speak Arabic, but

Source: Bajekal 2015



²⁶ (JeuneAfrique 2017)

²⁷ (UN High Commission on Refugees 2017, *Support for the Transition*)

²⁸ (Al Rifai 2017)

²⁹ (Al Rifai 2017)

³⁰ (UNHCR, personal communication, December 7 2017)

³¹ (Hilleary 2013)

they have their own dialect called “Domari.”³² They are commonly uneducated, ending up as beggars and often marrying very young.³³

The following demographic chart comes from UNHCR’s September report regarding Syrians in Morocco. This helps contextualize the individual accounts I provide later in this essay. As the table shows, my interviewees do not reflect every—or even most—types of Syrians in the country.

Age and Gender		Specific need	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Adults: 51% ○ Minors: 49% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Unaccompanied minors: 3 ○ Child-at-risk: 36 ○ Older-at-risk: 25 ○ Woman-at-risk: 1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Single parents: 16 ○ Disability: 31 ○ Medical condition: 73 ○ Protection needs: 3 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Female: 47% ○ Male: 53% 			
Marital Status		Ethnicity and religion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Single: 56.5% ○ Married: 77.8% ○ Others (engaged, separated): 2.2% <p>Many applicants stated that they are informally married to Moroccan women because they could not register their marriage while they had no legal residence in Morocco. The situation has evolved positively, since many Syrians have obtained a residence permit through the regularisation process for migrants.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Arabs: 90.5% ○ Kurds: 8% ○ Others: 1.5% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Islam Sunni: 99.6% ○ Christians: 0.1% ○ Others: 0.3% 	
Place of residence in Svria		Place of residence in Morocco	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Homs: 25% ○ Hama: 19% ○ <u>Idlib</u>: 13% ○ <u>Aleppo</u>: 12% ○ Damascus: 9% ○ <u>Latakia</u>: 3% ○ Others: 2% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Casablanca: 20% ○ Oujda: 16% ○ <u>Kenitra</u>: 10% ○ <u>Temara</u>: 6% ○ Others: 48% <p>Despite the fact that an increasing number of Syrians are in possession of a residence permits, still the majority are renting accommodations without a formal lease agreement.</p>		
Occupation		Education	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Primary sector (agriculture, fisheries, etc.): 9% ○ Secondary sector (industry, transformation, etc.): 3% ○ Tertiary sector (services, trade, etc.): 40% ○ Undetermined/unknown: 2% ○ <u>Students</u>: 1% 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Primary: 44% ○ Secondary: 15% ○ Technical/vocational: 0% ○ Post-/university: 2% ○ No education: 39% 	

Source: UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2017). *Information Note on Syrians Applying for Asylum in Morocco*

³² (Hilleary 2013)

³³ (Hilleary 2013)

Many Syrians arrive in Morocco hoping to move somewhere else one day. The most common Syrian refugee migration flow from July to September of 2017 was through Melilla, an enclave of Spain located at the northern tip of Africa.³⁴ According to UNHCR records, over 1,500 Syrians arrived in Spain between December and September of this year,³⁵ and 60% of those asylum seekers had been in Morocco for less than three months.³⁶

A substantial amount of literature concerns refugees' decisions to stay or leave the country to which they immediately flee. Mulki Al-Sharmani of the Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies goes into specific factors that influence whether refugees decide to stay, referring to "family and community-based support systems," as well as employment and education opportunities as primary influences in these decisions.³⁷ Aysel Güzde Yılmaz, a professor at Yasar University, explores factors that determine reasons for choosing and remaining in Morocco.³⁸ She concludes that one of the primary reasons migrants end up in Morocco is that other North African countries, such as Libya, are less stable after the Arab Spring.³⁹ She also breaks down the four different types of migrants living in Morocco: those who intentionally chose Morocco, those in transit to Europe, those who accidentally ended up there as victims of misleading smugglers, and those who decide to stay in Morocco instead of returning to their home countries.⁴⁰ Based on UNHCR data, the majority of Syrian refugees seem to fall into those

³⁴ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2017, *Desperate Journeys*)

³⁵ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2017, *Desperate Journeys*)

³⁶ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2015)

³⁷ (Al-Sharmani 2014, 71)

³⁸ (Yılmaz 2016)

³⁹ (Yılmaz 2016)

⁴⁰ (Yılmaz 2016, 157)

in transit to Europe.⁴¹ However, the refugees I interviewed have all been in the country for at least three years, and fit best in the last category.

SPECIAL NOTE ON UNHCR

The vast majority of my background research on Syrian refugees in Morocco comes from statistics and facts collected by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. This is because UNHCR is the primary source of information on this issue; they collect the most statistics, and are the organization that all refugees who wish formal recognition and benefits must go through. However, some have argued that there are weaknesses to UNHCR as an organization, and as a source of information on Syrian refugees. For example, Stephan Scheel and Philipp Ratfisch, of the Open University and the University of Hamburg, respectively, claim that UNHCR uses the guise of refugee protection to manage migration, so that privileges and advantages only go to a select portion of the population of migrants—those who fall under their narrow categorization of “refugees.”⁴² They claim this gives UNHCR agency to help carry out deportations for those who do not fit under their narrow definition of refugee (those forced to flee for their lives).⁴³

Furthermore, UNHCR itself admits that “many more Syrians are in Morocco [than have been registered], including persons who wish to move onwards to Europe”⁴⁴ About half of the

⁴¹ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2017, *Information Note on Syrians Applying for Asylum in Morocco*)

⁴² (Scheel and Ratfisch 2014, 924)

⁴³ (Scheel and Ratfisch 2014)

⁴⁴ (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2017, *Information Note on Syrians Applying for Asylum in Morocco*, 1).

Syrians I spoke with had no interaction whatsoever with the Moroccan government or UNHCR, and viewed both entities as mostly useless for refugees. Thus, it is important to note that this background information is not altogether comprehensive or nonpartisan, which makes my interviews with real Syrian refugees all the more critical.

ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

I initially planned to work primarily with *Fondation Orient-Occident's* (FOO) Rabat location. This NGO has centers for vocational training and education, as well as a social center to support young people.⁴⁵ I assumed that the locally based, well-established organization would give the best and quickest access to refugees.⁴⁶ However, reaching Syrian refugees through the FOO proved tricky. A Fondation employee told me that most Syrians do not spend time taking classes at the center, preferring to keep to themselves and simply receiving health and social services. I did eventually speak with one Syrian refugee through FOO, who was the only Syrian in a language class of all Yemeni and sub-Saharan African migrants.

This led me to assume that speaking with Syrian refugees would prove highly difficult, especially due their sensitive situation. I also worried that asking them about their lives would bring up trauma from their past, something I did not think I had the right to ask about as a privileged white American, especially given America's tumultuous involvement in the Syrian Civil War. I am also not professionally trained to appropriately manage trauma. This is why I decided to focus my interview questions entirely on people's time in Morocco. I hoped that this

⁴⁵"Structures and Activities." *Foundation Orient-Occident*. Foundation Orient-Occident, n.d. Web. 4 Apr. 2017.

⁴⁶"Structures and Activities." *Foundation Orient-Occident*. Foundation Orient-Occident, n.d. Web. 4 Apr. 2017.

would ensure that my interviewees did not feel the need to talk about their time in Syria if they did not want to.

I ended up finding that the Syrians I asked to interview were more than willing to speak with me about their lives in Morocco, and excited that I focused my research on them. All of the refugees I interviewed also voluntarily brought up their lives in Syria, reflecting on differences between their lives in each country. Even so, I was careful not to press them on their time in Syria unless they brought up the issue first.

The business sector, specifically the restaurant industry, proved the most productive place to find interviewees. I found that operating via Syrian restaurants generated far more interviews than Foundation Orient-Occident. My first interview came after I ate at Yamal Alsham, a Syrian restaurant on Hassan II in downtown Rabat. I went to the counter, explained that I was a student researching the lives of Syrians living in Morocco, and was directed to a Syrian man who was happy to speak with me. I repeated this with several restaurants in the area, building a network through employees. After finishing each interview, I would ask if my interviewee knew of any other people who might be willing to speak with me. This likely limited my sample demographic. However, according to several participants, a large portion of the current Syrian population in Rabat works in the restaurant industry. I also interviewed a few people who interact with Syrian refugees. A UNHCR worker, and Moroccan woman who lived in Syria for eight years provided a more holistic story about Syrian life here. I include these perspectives because a large part of describing lives involves whom people interact with.

I was initially concerned about the potential language barrier. I have studied classical Arabic for three years, but my proficiency is still limited. I originally thought using a translator

would be the best solution, however a narrative format requires direct quotes from my participants, not translated interpretations. Thus I concluded that I would be better suited to record my interviews directly, and reconcile anything I did not understand later by working with my Arabic professor.⁴⁷ I also found that conducting the interviews one-on-one made participants more comfortable. Many spoke about issues they had with Moroccan people or culture, and a Moroccan translator might have made them more hesitant to speak on this subject.

There were times during interviews when I did not understand everything my interviewees said. Luckily, all participants consented to being recorded so I could sort out what they meant later, but this affected my ability to ask follow-up questions. Many interviewees also spoke quite a bit of English, and the Syrian dialect is close to classical Arabic, so we could generally understand each other. Ultimately, I think my decision not to use a translator was the right choice for the nature of my project and research questions.

Even so, gaps in my research give rise to a number of qualifications about this work. First, my research does not reflect the lived experiences of many Syrians. I would have preferred a much larger and more diverse sample size. As UNHCR statistics indicate, the majority of Syrian refugees in Morocco do not live in Rabat, spend a very limited amount of time in the country, have only a primary education, and are married. I spoke with only those who lived in Rabat, since that is where I could build connections. Of the six Syrians I spoke with, all had been in Morocco for over three years, many had a college education, and only two were married. I was unable to interview any of the Dom people, the most common sect of Syrians entering Morocco

⁴⁷ Note: one of my interviewees brought his friend, a Palestinian refugee who spoke English, with him to the interview. In this case, his friend acted as a partial translator.

in the past three years, although some of my interviewees mentioned them as “beggars” with whom they did not like to associate.

Furthermore, my results do not represent all of the various ways Syrians recreate their lives in Morocco. Despite coming from the same home country, everyone lives are autonomous and unique. I used the same basic research questions for every refugee, which pointed out emerging trends, but did not allow comprehensive coverage of all of the ways that people recreate their lives here (for example, I did not ask very in-depth questions about people’s families). My research questions are as follows:

Background:

Where are you from?

How old are you?

Do you have refugee recognition?

Do you have a residency?

Have you had any contact with the Moroccan government or UNHCR for refugee services?

1. Has your life changed since you arrived here?
2. What do you like about Morocco?
3. What is hard about living here?
4. What do you do in your free time?
5. Is it hard to find work? Why?
6. Is it hard to find a home? Why?
7. Does speaking a different dialect cause problems? In what ways?
8. Tell me about someone who has helped you in your new life here.
9. What would you like your life to be like in five years?

I intentionally kept these open-ended, in order to let the interviewees guide the conversation. In every interview I asked follow-up questions, and spent more time on what participants wanted to discuss. I did not ask every one of these questions in each interview.

TRENDS

Every individual experience is different, which is why I present results mainly in direct-quote form. However, some interesting themes emerged.

First, there seems to be a gap between UNHCR claims about Syrian refugees and Syrian refugees' lived experiences. The UNHCR employee I spoke with was proud of UNHCR's efforts, offering little that she thought they could improve on. She believed they provided a "full package" of services that allowed people to live in the country with "no borders in terms of what you can do."⁴⁸ She claimed that the Syrian communities' lack of interaction with UNHCR was a result of their own voluntary isolation. On the other hand, the people I interviewed expressed a general lack of satisfaction with what the United Nations could do for them. Only two of my Syrian interviewees had any direct contact with the UN, and only one of those two received any UN benefits. Granted I had a small sample size, but several people spoke generally about what others in their community faced, and seemed to think the UN could not meet Syrian refugee needs. Residency cards seemed to be much more desirable and powerful here, and all of my participants who did not have one wished to.

A second theme that emerged involved tension between Syrian refugees' general appreciation of Morocco and the Moroccan people, and a longing for their home country. The Syrians I spoke with voiced appreciation for Morocco's food, natural beauty, and openness, and valued a country more peaceful than Syria. A few specifically mentioned that they did not experience racism. At the same time, no one said his or her transition to life here was easy. Many Syrians felt that they were not treated the same as native citizens. It was clear that their home

⁴⁸ (UNHCR, personal communication, December 7, 2017)

country remains on the forefront of many of their minds—people openly compared Syria and Morocco, even though none of my research questions directly asked about their home country.

Third, everyone I spoke with utilized connections with an already existing Syrian community to ease their transition. Some already had family in Morocco whom they joined when they arrived. Many interviewees work in Syrian restaurants, and some acquired homes through the owners or managers of these places. Of those employed, most said it was not difficult to find work, but voiced dissatisfaction with the work they found. Many spoke about long hours and high living expenses. A few talked about the barriers they face trying to get a job in the white collar sector, due to lack of residency or citizenship.

What follows are short biographies of the individuals I interviewed, with names changed to maintain confidentiality. After that comes direct quotes from interviewees, separated into sections based on overarching themes. I sorted them this way to track trends and disparities in refugees' experiences. I have done my best to leave the exact language my participants used, except when translation made that difficult. Ellipses indicate discussion in between. I occasionally removed filler words such as “um” and “like” for ease of reading. My hope is that these direct reports provide a nuanced view of how Syrians recreate their lives and sense of place in Morocco.

SUBJECT PROFILES

For each interviewee, I include their age, where they are from, their occupation, whether they have UNHCR recognition, residency, and/or citizenship status, how long they have been in Morocco, as well as a few details about their lives. I only use first names, and gave people the option to have theirs changed.

HOUMAM: 25. Aleppo. Cook at Yamal al Sham. No UNHCR recognition, residency, or citizenship status, but applied for residency. Has been in Morocco for seven months. Lived in Senegal and Mauritania before Morocco. Speaks Wolof (Senegalese dialect), French, Arabic (Classical, Syrian, Moroccan). Has a medicine degree.

ALI: 24. al-Tel (suburb of Damascus). Law student at University of Mohammed V. No UNHCR recognition, but citizenship because mother is Moroccan. Been in Morocco for 5 years. Runs a cooking class on the side, and teaches Syrian dialect lessons. Used to work at YamalAlsham.

HANEEN: 20. Damascus. Medical student at University of Mohamed V. No UNHCR recognition card, but residency because her father has been here longer than her and applied for it. Been in Morocco for 6 years. Went to high school in Tangier, and only moved to Rabat for her University degree. Haneen is her real name, and she wanted me to leave it in. It means “nostalgia” in Arabic.

KHADIJA: 35. Born in Morocco, lived in Damascus from 2003-2011. Waitress at Al Shami. Moroccan citizen. Moved to Syria and got married; moved back when her husband died.

MAHMOUD: 53. Damascus. Server at Yamal Al Sham. Has recognition with the United Nations, but no residency. Been in Morocco for 6 years. Has a family here (a wife and three daughters) who all moved from Syria.

MARWA: 22. Damascus. Public law student at Mohamed V University. Has identification card from Fondation Orient-Occident; no residency. Has been in Morocco for 5 years. Lives with parents, three sisters, and two brothers. Takes English and French classes at Fondation Orient-Occident.

MOHAMMED: 33. West Ghouta. Server at AbtalAcham. Has registration with UNHCR, and a “carte nationale” with the Moroccan government. Been in Morocco for four years. Came to Morocco with mother, father, wife, and three kids ages 4, 5, and 6.

UNHCR Employee: Associate external relations officer for UNHCR Morocco. Does not directly work with Syrians on a regular basis. Has published articles on Syrian refugees in Morocco.

TESTIMONIALS

ON UNHCR AND THE MOROCCAN GOVERNMENT

[The] Syrian refugee card [is] not a problem. Residence card is a problem. I can work, but it is obligatory for the study of something [to have a residency]...The United Nations here doesn't give much for refugees. 300 dirhams a month. There is not a refugee system here...the Moroccan government did not help with refugee law. Neither do governments in Algeria, in Lebanon, in any country. It isn't the United Nation's fault; they don't have power...they must respect the laws of the country they are in. If the government here does not ok for the refugees, the United Nations cannot help anything.

–Houmam

I really cannot understand how people live here because there is no support; there is nothing. So I'm pretty sure that there is people who are suffering here...I see it in the streets

—Houmam

At the beginning...there was help for my kids for school, a little, 25 dollars per month. Now, no. They called me [recently], the UN, and said“take help.” I said [to the UN] “if you want any help, come to me, I will help you.” Because when I needed help, they didn’t help me. They thought I was a liar, in the beginning here.

—Mohammed

Last year, [my family got] 600 dirhams per month ...I want money to my family because my father is not working. The last three years...he worked. But now, no work. ...We talk with them every day, and we don’t have any money...one month ago, they told me “you have a DAFI” to study...I go to bank. I don’t have money [for DAFI].⁴⁹ I called them, they told me no. They gave it to my sister, but me, no.

—Marwa

In Morocco, you must have a [residency] card. Yesterday I wanted to buy a router. [But]you don’t have a card, you don’t have a router. My uncle who has a [residency] card, he does it [all]. My father’s telephone is in the name of my uncle. The car, like this; the home, like this. My father has nothing in his name in Morocco.

—Marwa

So far,UNHCR in Morocco is really doing great compared to other countries. Because we really provide a full package of services. When you are a refugee in Morocco there are almost no borders for you in terms of what you can do. Because you can go to school; you can go to university; we can assist you with cash; we can give you classes; you can go to see a doctor. So really there is a comprehensive protection package that we deliver in Morocco. And definitely the situation in Morocco is better for refugees than in turkey or Lebanon or Jordan.

—UNHCR Worker

⁴⁹ DAFI is a program run by the UNHCR that offers scholarship money to refugees.

We really help them to establish themselves here and to enable the local integration...our role is really to help the government to enable conditions for refugees to fulfill their human rights and to stay in Morocco.

—UNHCR Worker

ON NAVIGATING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

I'm not Muslim...here it's difficult because when you go to church people will look at you.

—Houmam

I registered in law school and I started study with Moroccan people...Moroccan law, Moroccan ideology. We have another ideology in Syria. Our ideology is "ishtrakiya"(socialism)...We see America like the biggest evil in the world because, you know, our relationships with Iran and Russia. So that affects the society and individuals. So when I came here, a lot of things changed. I started to talk with American people, with European people...my mind became open.

—Ali

Moroccans, they are so funny. They are simple...when they fight with each other I die laughing. They are aggressive. But they are aggressive in peace; they stay in the peace. Not like Syrians and Lebanese and Iraqis. We have a long history with violence in our society. But here, they are funny. And if you want to laugh you can start with the server or with anybody. Aggressively talking...and if you change you accent she will be nice. So you can control his action with you quickly. That's funny, I think.

—Ali

Moroccan people understand the Syrian dialect, and all Gulf languages. They speak in their dialect, and we understand. But to speak with them in Moroccan dialect, it is hard, because their language is close to the standard dialect, but the Moroccan dialect is far from the standard dialect.

—Khadija

It's hard to change the culture, the society, the friends...yeah I have my family here, but I have just my parents, my sisters, my brothers...At first I was stressed; I was depressed. It

was hard for me especially to complete my studies...I always felt that I will not continue like this. I will return to my country, and it's just a temporary period...So I didn't make friends at first...But then when I realized that it's the truth, I started to make friends, to know people, to accept the culture here, the society here. Its different, the culture, its different. You're Arab, yes, but its different.

—Haneen

Everything is hard. The nostalgia. I feel lost between the past and the present. People here are really kind and they love Syrian people, but I always feel that I'm not Moroccan. People here are not racist. I've never met someone who is aggressive because I'm Syrian. But it's hard for me. The problem is me. I cannot just forget, and its hard to accept that maybe you will stay here for who knows. I feel like I'm stuck.

—Haneen

We study there in Arabic and English. There is no French. I came to Morocco so I was obliged to learn French and all this... And it was hard because it is really different. From the vocabulary, grammar, everything...Now I speak French better than English...Now I'm glad because I always think that I can speak Arabic, I can speak Syrian, I can speak Moroccan, I can speak French, I can speak English. So I want to learn more. I want to learn maybe Spanish.

—Haneen

Here in Morocco, all of the people are the same. There is monotone. I miss those days where there is someone who is Christian and someone who is Muslim...I feel like...the thinking of people is so limited. When you talk about something nobody understands you. If you talk about Christmas they say "ah in the television"...and when you want to talk about religions, about traditions, about cultures, I see that here is very limited because here there is one religion one tradition...There is difference here, but I'm talking about...ideas. More than things that we see just from the outside.

—Haneen

A good thing here—at all levels, you have three ways to live. The poor, they live, and eat. The middle, they live, and eat. And the rich live. Any person. If you are poor, if you don't have work, you can live. Not like the gulf. In the gulf, if you don't take a lot you don't eat. In Morocco you can take a little and eat.

—Mohammad

Even if you live in a paradise you can't feel happy because it's not your nation.

—Mohammad

This particular community is very difficult to reach out to. They are quite close and closed and not very approachable. So whenever we want to speak to them or engage them in some kind of activities they are not so willing to get out of this very closed community...this is their cultural difference. A byproduct of this situation is the fact that girls, they have difficulty going to school...when it comes to secondary school it's difficult because those girls get married...for boys it is also difficult to continue school in the secondary term because they also have to go to work.

—UNHCR Worker

ON EMPLOYMENT

I have good work...Schawarma. I can work and eat...The persons here don't know the secret of Schawarma...Professionally, it's Syrian... I found work quickly, but I chose the one with the best money and time. Now I work 7 hours, I take \$700 a month. It's not bad. I can search for another work at night if I want. It's nice.

—Houmam

[In] Syria I finished my baccalaureate. [Then], in Mauritania I study seven years medicine. When I have residence, I can work as a doctor. But now it's difficult. I have my certificate, [and I applied for] the residence card after one month...I have to wait. Wait, wait, wait. It's hard. If I don't have the card I will leave Morocco and continue to Belgium.

—Houmam

As a doctor, I cannot work here in the public hospitals and also I cannot make my own [practice, because I am not a citizen]. I have a residency, but you can [only] work in private hospitals. But it's hard. You have to know someone.

—Haneen

I can't find friends. Long day, everything is work. No vacation, no weekends. Every day is the same. In the restaurant you have to be on the hour every time. At 8 am I take my kids to school, and end at 11 or 12 at night...I talk to my kids on whatsapp.

—Mohammad

I'm obligated to work...but I am in retirement [age]...The life is expensive. In Syria, life is more cheap. In Syria you can work just 8 hours and you can leave. [Here,] 12-15 hours. And it's still expensive

—Mohammad

ON HOME/EVERYDAY LIFE

Here [living is]hard. Because Moroccans are afraid of Syrians. They think that we are terrorism. And if you don't have a big amount of money you will not find good [home].

—Ali

I stopped singing when I started law school...But I started to sing with some of my Moroccan friends. They don't have a good voice but they have a good taste. I stopped singing and I stopped poetry. I stopped writing. I was writing stories. Politics, but I stopped that. Because people don't deserve to give them my ideas free.

—Ali

It's hard, because somewhere to live it means somewhere to work and to have money. And Morocco is much more expensive than Syria. In Syria you can have a home and you pay like 1,000 dirhams by month, and here you pay 4 or 5 thousand. And it's hard to get work with this money. And it's hard because you have to look for a place where you feel safe, and there is police everywhere, because you are not Moroccan so you cant just live anywhere... you always have to pay attention because they know that you are a stranger.

—Haneen

I had a friend who is Moroccan. His name is Akram. He helped me a lot. I remember that first when I came to Morocco he came to my home two or three times per week just to help me in French and stuff...and I made friends just because of him.

—Haneen

Morocco is a beautiful country...the nature is amazing...I can see that it's more modern than Syria...I went to Tangier, to Tetouan, to Chefchaouen, to Meknes, to Casablanca, to Sahara. My father always tries to take me and show me its beautiful.

—Haneen

I feel like I was born to be a doctor. It was a dream. When I came to Morocco I never thought that I would be able to study medicine.

—Haneen

The schools are okay... The teachers don't teach them well. They don't take their job seriously. They are just making money.

—Mohammad

I have my family here and in Syria...5 girls. 12, 10, 8, 7, 6, ...live in Rabat. I visit them just one time in the week...but the other days I sleep in the home for workers near YamalAlsham. The owner of the restaurant, he rented for workers, a house for sleeping.

—Mohammad

I'm the first in Morocco in baccalaureate...the first of the non-Moroccans ...I study public law...I entered into law because my French is zero...I want to study masters after the university: diplomacy, because I love it.

—Marwa

Security is bad here. I was stolen from last year two times...he had a big knife in his hand...near my house...me and my sister...I talked with the police, one time, two times, three times, nothing

—Marwa

ON MOROCCAN PERCEPTIONS OF SYRIANS

I can go the United Nations [to get a refugee card], but maybe in Morocco another Arab person doesn't respect the refugee card...There's not a refugee culture here. In the Arab

nations, there's no refugee culture. There's a dictatorial culture. In Syria, all the problems were because of the president—he is a dictator. All the countries helped him, and don't respect the refugees. All countries conspire about Syria, and the Syrian people are killed.

—Houmam

As a Syrian, I cannot do that well. Sometimes, they see us and say “you are not refugees.” Technically we are refugees because we escaped from the war to Morocco, but they don't give us anything. They don't give us money. They don't give us support. Sometimes they are negative with our situation, with our country... So when I'm faced with Moroccan man or Moroccan woman and we speak about Syria I am aggressive with him or with her about my country. It's going. It hasn't died.

—Ali

If you deal with Moroccans as a Syrian, and you sit with him in the café, and you demand coffee, maybe he will pay. But he will pay not because he likes you, but because you are weak in his eyes. And that's not so nice for us... The Moroccan government used the subject in a very evil strategy and way. They make us like a business for their opinion about revolutions in the Arab world. They want to say “look, Moroccan people. Our people. Look at the Syrians; look what they did to themselves. They now beg in our country. Don't do that; don't do a revolution.” They don't know that the circumstances in Syria are so different.

—Ali

It's very good because the Moroccan people love any people. Different cultures, Muslim or not Muslim, it's good here. No problems here in Morocco.

—Khadija

Always, you [had] to pay attention how to treat people, how to speak, how to talk with people, how to give them the example of Syrian girl...to show that you are not aggressive, that you are not violent, that you are kind, that you are a human...[but] now, I feel that it doesn't matter, because people who care for me...will make an effort for me, you know?

—Haneen

The war makes the Syrians, especially the children, so depressed...my brother...fits in in Morocco. But my sister, no. She is always depressed and...always alone. And I think because of the switch it's really hard...and we are living in Morocco, but the people who are still in Syria are suffering much more than us. You know it's hard to just sleep and you're hearing

the bombs and all of this. So I think that we have to focus on this side of psychology because this war will make a lot of problems in society, especially psychological problems.

—Haneen

CONCLUSION

I believe that these testimonials speak for themselves to show ways Syrian refugees navigate their lives in Morocco. Interviews focused on refugee status, family, work, language, and cultural differences, profiling people who work both individually and collectively to recreate their lives in a new place. This is only a small sampling of refugees, with severe limitations in scope. However, these interviews paint a partial picture of a displaced population striving to recreate their lives in an unfamiliar place.

More than 5 million people have fled Syria since the start of the conflict, each with diverse backgrounds and stories. As Haneen's last testimony points out, there will be psychological repercussions for people in and out of Syria long after the war ends; learning about the experiences of refugees is important in gaining a full picture of these consequences. Despite differences in their lives, every one of the Syrian refugees I interviewed demonstrated tremendous persistence, dignity, and courage, and I feel lucky to have learned from them.

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