

EU Centre Commentary Series

3rd September 2018

“Reverse Migration” - Facing hostility, neglect and exclusion, Syrian refugees “repatriate” themselves home

By Shanisse Goh (Research Intern, EU Centre)



Syrian refugees having rest at the floor of Keleti railway station. Refugee crisis. Budapest, Hungary, Central Europe, 5 September 2015 by Mstyslav Chernov (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

As I write this article, the various European Union (EU) foreign affairs ministers are in Vienna for an [informal meeting](#) to discuss several issues pertinent to the bloc. One issue has crept into the agenda – but with a heart-rending twist. Russia is pushing the EU to [repatriate Syrian refugees](#), but they have already been trickling home on their own.

We are familiar with the numbers of Syrian refugees flooding into Europe – [over a million](#) displaced Syrians have migrated to Europe since the crisis began in 2015. The statistic we are unfamiliar with, however, is the growing number of Syrian refugees heading home from Europe. In 2017, [66,000](#) refugees returned to Syria from abroad, mostly from neighbouring countries such

as [Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey](#). The number of refugees returning from Europe is currently only a fraction of that number, but as the dust settles in Syria and refugees continue to [face hostility](#) in host countries, the number returning from Europe is set to rise. It is unclear just how many refugees are leaving Europe, mainly because most of them utilise [illegal pathways](#) to get home. However, research conducted since last year has revealed the phenomenon of “reverse migration”.

The Irish Times used the term “reverse migration” to describe the efforts by Syrian refugees in Europe to return home. In December 2017, the publication revealed that a growing number of Syrian refugees are returning home from EU countries like Germany, Sweden and Denmark. These refugees previously risked their lives trying to enter the EU under harsh conditions, crossing tumultuous seas and multiple borders to get to their host countries, and now they are giving it all up to go home.

The newspaper interviewed dozens of Syrian refugees in Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland and several other countries, who are considering going home, have attempted the journey, or have already returned to what is still a war zone. The responses were unsurprising. Discrimination and a sense of alienation from their host communities are common among Syrian immigrants. Many are also upset by rejected family reunification applications.

For Ammar Maarawi who fled to Suhl, a German city, there was psychological pressure from [homesickness, winter, and language barriers](#). Adeeb Ayoub, a Syrian teenager, expressed that the people he encountered in Germany were [different from them](#), and they belong to a different religion. Zakariya claimed that his hosts view refugees as [terrorists instead of Muslims](#); repeated attempts at integration were met with frosty rejection. Um Farouk articulated the [Islamophobia](#) she faced wearing a veil in Denmark, a non-Muslim country. Some families, including those who remained in refugee tents, returned after losing hope that their [deteriorating existence as refugees](#) would ever improve. Behind every one of these reasons is a Syrian family suffering from domestic injustice in their recipient countries.

Standards for housing, education and employment, are far from ideal in many EU countries. There is a [lack of binding rules](#) specifying the type of housing that should be provided, leading authorities to house asylum-seekers in isolated camps or “[parachute them] into unprepared communities” hostile to their arrival. With the exception of Germany, who has spent a whopping [€559 million euros](#) on language courses for refugees and made commendable efforts to educate them, EU countries largely leave refugees to their own devices when it comes to learning the local language and culture. Some EU countries take up to a year to grant refugees access to the labour market even after their application has been approved. Even if formal access has been obtained, [integration into the workforce is challenging](#) due to language barriers and xenophobia. The social fabric of EU countries is also largely resentful towards immigrants, with a surge in far-right political parties and an insistence that newcomers should assimilate to local values and culture – forsaking [fundamental parts of their identity](#) in the process. Finally, EU-wide family reunification rules are limited to a [narrow concept of the family unit](#): the core nuclear family. This conception excludes “common-law spouses, adult siblings and extended dependent family members who are

de facto parts of the family unit”, resulting in homesickness among refugees who lack support from essential family members.

Tragically, reverse migrants return to [arrest, torture, and even murder](#) by authorities. They are assumed to have been in collusion with Syrian opposition leaders living in Europe and are subjected to interrogation in prison. Besides facing regime-inflicted violence, they are also prone to co-optation by ISIS, [forced to fight tirelessly everyday](#) with only one daily meal of bread and potatoes. A new UN report states that there might be up to [30,000 ISIS fighters](#) still active in Iraq and Syria. Such are the conditions that await refugees who go home prematurely.

The EU is unlikely to concede to Russian pressure to send refugees back to Syria; EU officials have insisted that Syria is unsafe, especially under the Assad regime. What the EU does not realise, however, is that hostility and injustices that immigrants face in some of the EU member states is sending them back of their own accord. In effect, failing to address structural deficiencies is just as cruel as forcibly repatriating them. Judging from the structural factors that inhibit integration into EU countries, even if borders are open, immigrants may not necessarily lead better lives if domestic injustices have not been addressed. Adapting institutional structures to better accommodate immigrants is taxing on host countries, but if the EU wishes to follow through with its commitment to human rights and human dignity, more is demanded of recipient countries than simply opening borders.

About the EU Centre

Established in 2008, the EU Centre in Singapore was a joint project funded by the European Union (EU), the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National University of Singapore (NUS). From 2017, the Singapore Management University (SMU) has also become a partner in contributing to the operations of the EU Centre. The EU is now a joint partnership of these three local universities.

The primary mission of the EU Centre is to promote knowledge and understanding of the EU, its policies and development of its relations with Singapore and Southeast Asia through research, publications and different outreach programmes.

The EU Centre is the Coordinator of a 3-year Jean Monnet Network grant (Sep 2016 – 2019). The Network comprising the EU Centre, University of Indonesia, University of Malaya and Maastricht University, will be jointly organising a series of programmes and activities tied to two research themes on Multiculturalism and Multilateralism.

Other commentaries produced by the EU Centre in Singapore can be found at:
<http://bit.ly/euc-commentaries>

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



Copyright © 2018 EU Centre in Singapore. All rights reserved | Published in August 2018

The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the EU Centre in Singapore.