THE CASE OF DISPLACED SYRIANS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract - As a comprehensive program, the Saudi approach to reception and accommodation of displaced populations has demonstrated a wide area of coverage, flexibility, and adaptability in the wake of external crises. At its core, the approach covers legal status, education, healthcare, employment and societal integration. In terms of social integration, interviews and subsequent topic modeling were done with displaced Syrians in KSA with five themes emerging sense of displacement, family, uncertainty, legal status regulation and education for children. Overall, the Saudi approach to acceptance and accommodation of displaced Syrians demonstrates stark contrast from other countries and exhibits a high level of flexibility towards the displaced population.

Keywords - Refugees, Integration, Topic Modeling, Saudi Arabia

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite being a non-signatory of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, Saudi Arabia has had extensive exposure to receiving and accommodating displaced populations in the past half a century. These communities include both Arab and non-Arab groups, some of whom had the opportunity to naturalize and obtain Saudi citizenship. The policies created for each group and each wave make the foundation of the concept of asylum and, subsequently, inform the Saudi approach to reception and accommodation of displaced Syrians post-2011. In more recent history, the most unique example of refugee reception in the Kingdom occurred in the 1990s. After the Gulf War in 1991, more than 23 000 Iraqi civilians fled to Saudi Arabia and were placed in Rafha camp, located around 12 km from the Iraqi-Saudi border [1]. In an agreement with the UNHCR, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia recognized displaced Iraqis as refugees on 5 August 1991. At the end of 1992, the number of refugees in the Rafha refugee camp rose to 33 200. Following an agreement with the UNHCR, the provision of assistance to Iraqi refugees by the Kingdom made this type of assistance reach a high level unmatched on a global scale at the time. However, the Saudi assistance to Iraqi refugees failed to generate a self-sustainable framework and fortify a more concrete concept of asylum.

Community	*Number*	*Year(s)*	*Crisis cause*	*UNHCR assistance and registration*	*Type of accommodation*	*Primary outco*
Uighurs	*50 000*	*1930-50*	*Communist persecution*	*No*	*Urban (Mecca)*	*Citizenship*
Iraqis	*33 200*	*1991*	*Gulf War*	*Yes*	*Camp (Rafha)*	*Repatriatio*
Palestinians	*240 000*	*2001*	*Second Intifada*	*Yes*	*Urban (various)*	*Residence*

Nutrition	*Each refugee had a large variety of food including: bread, fresh fruit, sweets, melons, fish, rice, flour, pasta, meat, chick fresh vegetables, cheese, potatoes, olives, beans, jam, dry milk, dates, lentils, seasonal dates, eggs, etc.*
Water	*Each house had a running tap in the family section. The singles section was equipped with shared water taps. In additi camp officials provided 240 000 liters of drinking water per day, equivalent to 14 liters of drinking water per person per d*
Healthcare	*A state-of-the-art hospital was built at a cost of 100 million Saudi Riyals in 1993 [at the site], in which 27 doctors and nurses provide health services to refugees. In addition to the camp hospital, five doctors worked in the women's primary cl in the family section and the primary men's clinic inside the camp. All medicines prescribed by doctors were free of charg*
Public health	*Waste was collected by seven trucks a day, except on Fridays. There were also many disposal boxes distributed in appropriate places in the camp. Around 212 Iraqi refugees worked as cleaners in the camp and are paid a financial rewar*
Education	*The number of classrooms was 111. The total number of students was 2 840. The Saudi government appointed Iraqi refu teachers for education to be paid financial rewards.*
Clothes	*A clothing allowance was made twice a year: 350 SAR for women, 300 SAR for men, and 250 SAR for children.*

Namely, the problem remained with the nature of the Rafha refugee camp, given its strictly upheld curfew hours and absence of viable employment opportunities for refugees, all of which largely made them dependent on government assistance and incapable of self-reliance. With that experience and the vague language of the 1994 Arab Convention [2], Saudi Arabia faced the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011 without a concrete blueprint. However, the Kingdom has responded to the crisis by devising an alternative approach to reception and accommodation of displaced populations, subsequently applying the same principles to displaced Yemenis with the onset of war in Yemen.

II. METHODOLOGY

Number of interviewees	*21*
Age (average)	*30-40*
Gender (male)	*0.86*
Legal status (iqama)	*0.71*
Education (higher)	*0.64*
Employment (yes)	*0.62*
Family in KSA (yes)	*0.90*
Arrival post-2011	*0.48*

The research analysis which makes up the most significant section of this report includes data collection, topic modelling of semi-structured interviews with displaced Syrians in KSA, archival work and translation from Arabic to English. For my sampling-strategy for the Syrian community, I used non-probability sampling. In particular, I used self-selection, convenience and snowball sampling methods. Out of the 21 Syrian community members I conducted semi-structured interviews with, they were, on average, between 25 and 45 years old, most of them males, more than half with higher education and in employment, with almost all having family in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

III. SAUDI ARABIA: RECEPTION AND ACCOMMODATION OF DISPLACED SYRIANS

Since 2011, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has diligently worked to amend its traditional immigration and social integration system, thus developing a comprehensive approach to the reception and accommodation of displaced populations, with a special focus on displaced Syrians and Yemenis. The approach rests on five core pillars: (i) legal status regulation, (ii) access to education, (iii) access to healthcare,(iv) access to the labor market, and (v) social integration. At its core, it applies the traditional understanding of the visitor status to assist those in need.

3.1. Definition and Numbers

Displaced Syrians have come to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia post-2011 on a visit visa and are officially referred to as Syrian visitors. With 31 December 2018, there are 673 669 Syrian visitors residing in the Kingdom, with the number of 2 570 972 visit visa renewals from 2011 until the beginning of 2019 [3]. What substantiated the program for Syrians and distinguishes it from other programs is its adaptive nature and comprehensive cross-field coverage.

Type	*2011-2018*
N of 'iqama' holders	*413 003*
N of 'visit visa' holders	*673 669*
N of amnesty violators	*2 499*
N of visas extended every 3 months	*2 570 972*
N of Syrians with transit visas from Yemen	*15 819*
N of 'visit visa' holders who transferred to 'iqama'	*13 572*
N of deceased Syrian 'visit visa' holders	*287*
N of seats allocated to Syrian 'visit visa' holders in higher education	*7 950*
N of Syrian students enrolled in public education	*141 604*

The government program of assistance to displaced Syrians started with a series of Royal Decrees and High Orders that have been issues in the early years of the conflict and that have set the basis of subsequent programs of assistance with legal status regularization, employment, healthcare, education and social security. The Saudi model of displacement has shown to be flexible enough to expand, depending on the on-ground development and the larger context it is situated in. With the onset of conflict in Yemen, 15 819 Syrians fleeing the violence were given indefinite visit visas, several thousands of whom remain in the southern part of the Kingdom. Also, the same rights and benefits have applied to spouses and mothers of Syrians who come to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on a visit visa and hold the nationality of another country. In the healthcare sector, the government has enabled access to government hospitals for displaced Syrians free of charge, whereas no other non-national has been granted access to government hospitals within the Kingdom. It is important to note that access to the public healthcare system has been granted without any health insurance being necessary, given that the visitor status does not require health insurance coverage. King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center annual report 2015-2016 [4]: In the field of education, the Saudi government has designed and implemented a scholarship program for Syrians with a visit visa in public schools, resulting in 141 604 Syrians children being enrolled in public schools from 2011 to 2018 and more than 7 950 seats allocated to them in public universities in the past seven years free of charge.

Program name	*Number of beneficiaries*	*Total budget (USD)*
Medical service provided to Yemeni visitors/refugees at the Ministry of Health hospitals	*41 526*	*110 708 316*
Medical service provided to Yemeni visitors/refugees in primary healthcare centers	*437 034*	*174 813 600*
Medical service provided to Syrian visitors/refugees at the Ministry of Health hospitals	*35 232*	*93 928 512*
Medical service provided to Syrian visitors/refugees in primary healthcare centers	*369 346*	*147 738 400*
TOTAL	*1 364 725*	*1 959 746 048*

Program name	*Number of beneficiaries*	*Total budget (US*
The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Higher Education program to assist Syrian students (one academic year)	*7 950*	*105 997 350*
The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Higher Education program to assist Yemeni students (one academic year)	*3 880*	*51 732 040*
Assistance to Syrian students enrolled in public education (all educational levels)	*141 406*	*377 129 802*
Assistance to Yemeni students enrolled in public education (all educational levels)	*285 644*	*761 812 548*

Moreover, the King Salman Center for Humanitarian Aid and Relief (KS Relief) published an annual report in 2016 outlining the scholarship provision for displaced Syrians within the Kingdom: I conducted a focus group with administration staff and three Syrian female students at Dar Al Ulum (DAU), a private university in Riyadh. The students stated that life has gotten harder with each passing year of the conflict. One of the hardest implications was the fact that all three students had family members who have either died or who have been directly harmed by the conflict in Syria.

When it came to their life in the Kingdom, all three students described it as a normal life that they live together with other Syrians, locals and other Arabs, stating that they don't see themselves as different. Upon graduation, they plan on working in the Kingdom, as they see it as their home. The program caters to all levels of education; however, it has not coped well with the chronic over-crowdedness of public schools, especially in central city areas, which has made the demand for education not fully met by the supply of vacant seats for Syrian children in KSA. The addition of access to the labor market as a key pillar of the government program for displaced Syrians (and Yemenis) entered the structure in 2016, resulting in the development of a program called 'Ajeer for Syrian and Yemeni visitors' [6], in light of continued support to the war-torn Syrian brothers. When the temporary work permit is issued the nationalization rate of the hiring company will be changed in the Nitaqat program, thus connecting this program to Saudization. Additionally, the establishment should register the Syrian visitors with the General Organization for Social Insurance (GOSI) in the category of occupational dangers, given that their entry into the program automatically provides the same workplace safety rights as the iqama holders. Participants must be male and aged 18-60 in order to get the temporary work permit and hold a visitor card issued by the General Directorate of Passports (Jawazat). The entry into the program requires the fulfillment of two base conditions: (i) valid legal status in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and (ii) age between 18 and 65. In the three years since the creation of the program, more

than 14 000 work permits have been issued for Syrians on a visit visa. It is important to note that the program is fully automated and that the permits can be renewed every six months.

3.2. Topic Modeling and Social Integration of Displaced Syrians in KSA

Sense of displacement	Family and uncertainty	Social integration	Legal status regulation	Education and childr
KSA	work	Syrian	visit	children
remain	family	family	Riyal	school
wife	life	Saudi	visa	Riyadh
back	health	back	month	private
Syrian	money	home	pay	enroll
2011	apart	live	year	acceptance
husband	hard	time	iqama	services
expenses	live	situation	obtain	university
Arab	hard	assistance	renew	program
future	issues	Aleppo	status	start

The above table demonstrates the results of topic modeling [6] of my interviews (n=21). The five themes which have emerged from my interviews with Syrian community members are the following:
(i) sense of displacement
(ii) family and uncertainty
(iii) social integration
(iv) legal status regulation
(v) education and children
The themes closely align with the core aspects of the Saudi approach to reception and accommodation of displaced Syrians within the Kingdom.

The responses, comments and grievances have been primarily split based on employment, since the legal status; namely, iqama, and health insurance are both based on one's employment status within the Kingdom. Those Syrians that were employment had a much better experience, on average, than those who were not in employment. In regard to generational differences, younger Syrians tended to have a more negative overview of their experience with a bleaker outlook on the future, on average, when compared to older Syrians. This might be correlated with employment, given that those in the lower age bracket tended to be more likely to be unemployed, compared to those in the higher age bracket. And in regard to differences in responses between male and female interviewees, female interviewees had a more positive outlook on their integration experience in the Kingdom and their family prospects, on average, than male interviewees. All of the female interviewees in my sample were unemployed, two thirds of them being housewives and one third students.

IV. CONCLUSION

As a comprehensive program, the Saudi approach to reception and accommodation of displaced populations has demonstrated a wide area of coverage, flexibility, and adaptability in the wake of external crises. At its core, the approach covers legal status, education, healthcare, employment and societal integration. With the onset of war in Yemen, the approach has shown to be applicable to displaced Yemenis as well, thus demonstrating that it is not exclusive to a particular group of displaced persons. Further, with the development of the Ajeer program for employing displaced Syrians, and later Yemenis, the approach has also shown flexibility and ability to adapt to the demands of the country's domestic labor market and bridge it with the visitor status of displaced Syrians.

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