

Commentaries

The Saudi Approach to Reception and Accommodation: The Case of Displaced Syrians

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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.⁽¹⁾ The Kingdom has had a long history of assisting displaced populations both within and outside its borders, including the acceptance of Palestinians and Uighurs,⁽²⁾ a number of whom have become naturalized. However, nothing in this history has resulted in the creation of a comprehensive approach to regularizing displacement. Thus, the modification of the immigration system for visitors in order to receive and accommodate displaced Syrians is unprecedented, having the potential to shift the global approach to the reception and accommodation of displaced populations in a more locally-based direction.

The approach rests on four pillars: (i) legal status regulation, (ii) access to education, (iii) access to healthcare, and (iv) access to the labor market. At its core, it applies the traditional understanding of the visitor status to assist those in need. In regard to implementation, the approach has struggled with issues such as overcrowding in schools and hospitals. However, provided the on-the-ground difficulties can be properly recalibrated, the approach has the potential to become more self-sustainable and applicable to other countries.

(1) I would like to extend deep gratitude to His Highness, Dr. Abdullah Al Saud, for guidance, and Dr. Fahad Al Sharif for help in fieldwork, in addition to generous assistance I received from all the researchers in the Center's Research Department.

(2) During my fieldwork, I conducted an interview with the Head of Human Rights Department at the Ministry of Interior, which provided a historical overview of the state of immigration within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and official statistics on Syrians within the country. Full data can be accessed in the final research report. The interview took place in March 2019.

International critique

Reports from international organizations with worldwide impact and global readership, picked up by a copious number of news agencies, from the BBC and *Huffington Post* to Deutsche Welle, have been adamant in depicting the countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (formerly known and still referred to as the GCC) as inadequately responding to the Syrian refugee crisis.⁽³⁾ In its “Facts and Figures” section in 2014, Amnesty International wrote that the “six GCC countries have allocated zero resettlement places to Syrian refugees,”⁽⁴⁾ a fact that has not changed since. Along the same lines, Human Rights Watch (HRW) persists in stating that the Kingdom offers no refuge to people seeking protection and fleeing persecution.⁽⁵⁾

While HRW is right in that Saudi Arabia did not sign the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees,⁽⁶⁾ the rest of the statement is erroneous due to the semantics of the label “refugee.” There are no “refugees” in the Gulf, since none of the countries is a 1951 convention signatory. This makes their immigration systems operative in a realm that does not recognize refugees as such. However, the focus on the “refugee” label, especially in the context of the Gulf, misses the ground reality and misappropriates the substance of receiving and accommodating displaced populations that has been exercised in the GCC and led by Saudi Arabia.

On the research side, there is a lack of high-quality inquiries that would illuminate what the GCC governments have done for displaced Syrians, both domestically and abroad, thus creating a gap between academic assessments and the ground reality. Some researchers have attempted to provide insight into the number of Syrians within the GCC;⁽⁷⁾ however, discussions on inconsistencies based on demographic data not only fail to respond to the research questions on the model of displacement practiced by the Gulf but also shed doubt on persistent efforts done by their governments to accommodate displaced populations. Moreover, research inquiries on a topic as sensitive as forced migration tend to fall into the trap of applying the lens of traditional displacement models on the questions they pose, resulting in an inaccurate framing.

In parallel to the reports of HRW and Amnesty International, there was an expedient string of royal decrees and high orders without an expiration date issued by Saudi Arabia under the late King Abdullah, with the goal of receiving and accommodating displaced Syrians starting as early as the first years of the conflict.

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- (3) Chase Winter, “Arab Monarchies Turn Down Syrian Refugees over Security Threat,” Deutsche Welle, January 25, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/arab-monarchies-turn-down-syrian-refugees-over-security-threat/a-19002873>; Chaker Khazaal, “No, Arab Gulf Countries Are Not Taking in Refugees,” *Huffington Post*, October 13 , 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/chaker-khazaal/no-arab-gulf-countries-ar_b_8280448.html; Michael Stephens, “Migrant Crisis: Why the Gulf States Are Not Letting Syrians In,” BBC, September 7, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34173139>.
- (4) “Facts and Figures: Syria Refugee Crisis and International Resettlement,” Amnesty International, December 5, 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/12/facts-figures-syria-refugee-crisis-international-resettlement/>.
- (5) “Country Chapter: Saudi Arabia,” Human Rights Watch, last updated 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/saudi-arabia>.
- (6) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” 1951, <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>.
- (7) Françoise De Bel-Air, “A Note on Syrian Refugees in the Gulf: Attempting to Assess Data and Policies,” Gulf Migration Center, 2015, http://gulfmigration.org/media/pubs/exno/GLMM_EN_2015_11.pdf.

The aim of my work as a visiting fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies has been to provide an overview of the Saudi approach to the reception and accommodation of displaced Syrians. I chose to do fieldwork in Saudi Arabia as it is the largest host-country of displaced Syrians in the Gulf. I initiated a data-collection exercise and conducted semistructured interviews with a number of government entities, as well as with both local and international organizations operating in the country. I also organized a focus group with students and interviewed local charity organizations. I conducted twenty semistructured interviews with displaced Syrians across the span of two months (February and March 2019). The full research report will be published shortly after this commentary.

The subsequent sections briefly outline the four pillars of the Saudi approach to the reception and accommodation of displaced Syrians.

Definitions

To put a definitive tone on the debate about the numbers of Syrians in the Kingdom, we first need to understand who the displaced Syrians are. When research operates in a world of ill-defined definitions, it creates a fertile avenue for a serious misappropriation of facts, intentional or not. This, in turn, feeds the continuation of negative and evidence-free portrayal of the situation of those who are displaced as a direct consequence of conflict.

Displaced Syrians have come to Saudi Arabia post-2011 on a *visit visa* and are officially referred to as *Syrian visitors*. As of December 2018, there were 673,669 Syrian visitors residing in the Kingdom, with 2,570,972 renewals of visit visas from 2011 until the beginning of 2019.⁽⁸⁾ The Saudi government has been oriented to assist Syrians in the same capacity that the Kingdom had assisted Palestinians, Uighurs, and other displaced populations in the past, thus speaking to the Kingdom's long history of accommodating those in need. What substantiated the program for Syrians and distinguishes it from other programs is its flexibility, adaptive nature, and comprehensive cross-field coverage, which has been demonstrated with its endurance through the onset of the war in Yemen and the accommodation of displaced Yemenis in the Kingdom.

The Saudi approach to the reception and accommodation of displaced Syrians started with a series of Royal Decrees and High Orders that were issued in the early years (2011–2014) of the Syrian conflict, setting the basis for the regularization of legal status, as well as directions for employment, healthcare, education, and social integration.

Legal status

Based on the Royal Decrees, the mechanism of indefinite and free renewal of visit visas for displaced Syrians was put in place immediately. The overstayers have been continuously exempted from fines and deportation, a measure that also includes Yemenis and Palestinians. Moreover, Syrians with residency in the Kingdom who had been in the country prior to 2011 have also benefited from the program, given that their residency is renewed even if their passports have expired. In addition, their children are added to their residency even if they do not own a passport, given that the Syrian embassy in Riyadh is closed.

(8) Author's interview with the Ministry of Interior.

With the onset of conflict in Yemen, 15,819 Syrians fleeing the violence, several thousands of whom remain in the southern part of the Kingdom, were given indefinite visit visas.⁽⁹⁾ Also, the same rights and benefits have applied to spouses and mothers of Syrians who come to Saudi Arabia on a visit visa and hold the nationality of another country. To that extent, the Saudi approach to receiving and accommodating displaced Syrians has shown flexibility, depending on the on-the-ground development and the larger context in which it is situated. It should be noted, however, that such changes constrain the operational part of whom the program explicitly applies to, thus creating some uncertainty.

Healthcare

In the healthcare sector, the government has enabled free access to government hospitals for displaced Syrians, whereas no other nonnational has been granted access to government hospitals. It is important to note that access to the public healthcare system has been granted without any health insurance being necessary.

For Syrians whose legal status has become irregular, local charity organizations, such as Enayah⁽¹⁰⁾, whose mandate had originally been to assist Saudi nationals in the lower income bracket, assist Syrians whose documents have expired and cover up to 70 percent of their medical expenses in private hospitals. Given that most Syrians have been residing in Riyadh, Enayah has been the charity with the biggest mandate to assist displaced Syrians, and has helped more than 3,500 Syrian visitors residing in Riyadh since 2014 (the point when the organization embarked on creating a dataset of the populations it assists). Zamzam Association of Voluntary Health Services⁽¹¹⁾ is a charity with a similarly extended mandate, assisting Syrians in the city of Jeddah. Overall, these charities have been funded by private donations by Saudi nationals, and organizations, such as Aramco, SABB Bank, Almarai, and Arabian Shield Insurance.

The healthcare aspect of the program covers both public and private hospitals, also catering to Syrians whose legal papers have expired. However, the program has not coped well with the overcrowding of public hospitals, which has forced Syrians to turn to hospitals located further from the city center, which makes access to health services more difficult. Moreover, even though birth certificates are provided by the state, obtaining them may take months, thus making many Syrians less likely to report their children as official dependents.⁽¹²⁾

Education

The Saudi government has designed and implemented a scholarship program in public schools for Syrians with a visit visa, resulting in 141,604 Syrians children being enrolled in public schools from 2011 to 2018 and more than 7,950 seats allocated to them free of charge in public universities in the past seven years.⁽¹³⁾

(9) Author's interview with the Ministry of Interior.

(10) Enayah, <http://www.enayah.org.sa/> (accessed February 2019).

(11) Zamzam, <https://www.zmzm.org/> (accessed February 2019).

(12) During my fieldwork, I conducted twenty semistructured interviews with members of the Syrian community within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Full details of the interviews will be available in the final research report. The interviews took place in Riyadh in January and February 2019.

(13) Author's interview with the Ministry of Interior.

One of the most prominent examples of assistance to Syrian students in higher education has been the King Abdullah Scholarship program,⁽¹⁴⁾ which integrates Syrian students, regardless of whether they hold a visitor visa or have residency, into a larger scholarship scheme in the public university program. Moreover, the King Salman Center for Humanitarian Aid and Relief (KSRelief) published an annual report in 2016 outlining the scholarship provision for displaced Syrians within the Kingdom; namely, it reported that the special scholarship program of the Custodian of the Two Holy Temples covered the educational costs of 141,406 Syrian children in primary and secondary education, amounting to 377,129,802 USD, and the educational costs of 7,950 Syrian university students, amounting to 105,997,350 USD.⁽¹⁵⁾

Overall, the program caters to all educational levels; however, it has not coped well with the chronic overcrowding of public schools, especially in the central city areas, which has not fully met by the demand for education for Syrian children. In addition, private schools tend to be expensive and the government scholarship for Syrian children and students does not cover the private sector, thus making enrollment difficult.

Employment

The addition of access to the labor market as a key pillar of the government program for displaced Syrians started in 2016, resulting in the development of a program called Ajeer for Syrian and Yemeni visitors.⁽¹⁶⁾ The entry into the program requires two conditions: (i) valid legal status in the Kingdom and (ii) age between 18 and 65. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, in the three years since the creation of the program, more than 14,000 work permits have been issued for Syrian visitors.⁽¹⁷⁾ The program is fully automated.

The permits can be renewed every six months, and it is possible to transfer them to regular work permits and residency. The permits are also not limited in regard to the industry, position, or type of company, as long as the company has more than two employees. Any company that is registered with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development is eligible to enter the program.⁽¹⁸⁾ The responsibility for the fees and the renewal of the permit are placed on the company rather than the individual.

Overall, the program has shown to be fairly successful, given that entry into the program automatically provides labor law protection that is extended to all those on a work visa, including protection against physical harm at the workplace. The program, however, only includes males, which leaves a substantive number of Syrian visitors ineligible.

(14) King Abdullah Scholarship Program 2019, <http://monitor.icef.com/tag/king-abdullah-scholarship-program/>.

(15) King Salman Center for Humanitarian Aid and Relief, “Annual Report,” 2016, <https://www.ksrelief.org/English/DataAndResult/Documents/Annual%20Report%202015-2016.pdf>.

(16) Ajeer Program, 2019, <https://www.ajeer.com.sa/>.

(17) During my fieldwork, I conducted an interview at the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, with the director of the Ajeer program for Syrian and Yemeni visitors in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I obtained official statistics and the program overview from the ministry, which will be fully available in the final research report. The interview took place in March 2019.

(18) Author’s interview with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development.

Avenues for improvement

In order for the Saudi approach to reception and accommodation of displaced Syrians to translate into self-sustainable policies with a long-term vision, thus complementing Vision 2030, there are several avenues of advancement. First, in order for the approach to maintain its ability to effectively incorporate amendments, it needs further clarification of the categories of its beneficiaries. Second, in order to achieve seamless execution of high-level policies on the provision of education and healthcare, the creation of a coordinating body that streamlines both the horizontal collaboration between ministries and the vertical relationship between ministries and institutions would be the most effective way forward. This move will ensure both the flow of information and the self-sustainability of the approach. Finally, the approach has the capability to serve as a platform for translating the visitor status for displaced populations into a special protection status. Such a transition would not deviate from the protections and rights already provided under the current approach; however, it would distinguish displaced populations, such as Syrians and Yemenis, from regular visitors, thus furthering its operational clarity, self-sustainability, and applicability to other countries.

Conclusion

The Saudi approach to the reception and accommodation of displaced Syrians serves to encourage their self-reliance in a localized and context-specific setting. It encompasses legal status, education, employment, and health insurance, highlighting the importance of human security. Given the depth of inquiry and the wealth of data I have been able to obtain, this mapping exercise has the potential to: (i) illuminate the state of displaced Syrians within the Gulf, and (ii) update the understanding of migration in order to better adjust policies to local conditions that may require revised definitions of asylum and displacement, starting with a data-driven overview of the current program for displaced Syrians in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.