Liyun Wan*

A comparative analysis of Syrian refugee family integration in France and Germany

Abstract

This research note presents a comparative analysis of Syrian refugee family integration in France and Germany, focusing on challenges related to housing, language acquisition, and employment. Through a comparative ethnography involving 20 Syrian families, this study sheds light on the differences and similarities between the two systems. Germany employs a centralised approach, marked by proactive measures implemented after 2015, offering a comprehensive range of services from reception to employment through the Job centre. In contrast, France adopts a more decentralised model, requiring refugees to navigate through multiple structures. Despite these differing systems, both countries exhibit structural barriers that impact refugees, resulting in social downgrading and pronounced marginalization, particularly among the elderly and women. The study shows how the state shapes "human capital" and underscores the need for a more "human-centric" integration approach, emphasising the genuine understanding and well-being of refugees.

Keywords: Syrian refugee, integration, social downgrading, France, Germany

1. Introduction

The common discourse on immigrant integration typically portrays a linear trajectory: starting with language acquisition, progressing to employment, and culminating in broader social mobility. While this perspective aligns with many policy frameworks, scholars have critically assessed it, highlighting the diverse pathways and complex nature of integration (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Vertovec, 2007; Schnapper, 2007; Alba & Foner, 2015; Bernardot, 2019).

Refugees face a unique set of challenges. Beyond addressing trauma and forced displacement, they navigate specific integration measures, which include mandatory courses, movement restrictions, and distinct employment and housing provisions.

To explore these intricacies, this study adopts comparative ethnography methodologies (Marcus, 1995; Simmons and Smith, 2019). It particularly focuses on Syrian refugees in France and Germany, examining the factors that influence their lives. Informed by Arar and FitzGerald's systems approach (2022), this research emphasises the interplay of "refugeedom" – the relationship between refugees, state, and society – and "refugeehood" – the lived experience of being a refugee. This approach provides insights into the dynamic interactions between state policies, migration patterns, and individual refugee experiences.

* Liyun WAN (liyunwan089@gmail.com), University of Strasbourg, France & Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

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My research posits that refugee integration is not solely an individual journey. It is significantly moulded by the policies of the host society, prevailing social structures, and dominant cultural norms (Safi, 2006). Inspired by Heba Gowayed's work (2022), which investigates the role of state actors in the U.S., Canada, and Germany, my study focuses on the comparison between Germany and France.

The research question behind this study is: "What are the differences and similarities in the integration of Syrian refugee families in France and Germany?"

This study involves ten families each from Strasbourg and Frankfurt, primarily consisting of married couples with children. Originating from different regions of Syria, these families represent a diverse array of ethnic, confessional, and professional backgrounds.

The research has a dual focus. First, our longitudinal study spans 2–6 years, involving regular visits to these families and conducting interviews at various intervals (such as annually), offering insights into the evolving conditions of these families. Second, we compare the reception and integration policies of France and Germany to identify their differences and similarities. This comparative framework allows us to explore specific aspects – such as housing, language acquisition, and employment – as both resources and potential obstacles in the integration process.

This paper is a research note associated with the ongoing Ph.D. project titled "The Effects of Reception Policies on the Integration of Syrian Refugee Families in France and Germany: A Comparative Ethnographic Study". The fieldwork in Strasbourg commenced in 2019 and has spanned approximately four years, while the fieldwork in Frankfurt began in September 2022. This paper provides a preliminary comparison of the two systems, introducing early hypotheses and ideas that warrant further investigation.

2. Methodology

A variety of qualitative techniques were employed, including participant observation, life story interviews, and focus groups with family members. Recruitment was conducted using the "snowball sampling" method (Goodman, 1961). I initially met two families while volunteering with a local Syrian association in France. Through them, I had the opportunity to connect with more families. The families selected in Germany also resulted from connections with Syrian families in France.

In this research, I occupy a dual role as both an insider and an outsider. Early interactions often involved Franco-Arabic language exchanges and assistance with children's homework, establishing me as a friend to these families. This relationship grants me unique access to their daily lives and family dynamics. However, my role as a researcher also positions me as an observer, enabling nuanced yet detached insights. It took some time to build trust with the families before requesting inter-

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views. Drawing on Dwyer & Buckle (2009), my role operates in a "space between" insider and outsider perspectives.

It's also essential to be aware of the influence of this positionality. For instance, my role as a close friend to the mothers and daughters provided me access to in-depth information. However, this closeness might have affected the dynamics of interviews with other family members. Additionally, my identity as a "migrant" and "foreigner" often prompted them to ask about my experiences in both countries, which could have influenced their perspectives. Bourke (2014) emphasises the importance of self-awareness and reflexivity in the research process. To address these concerns, I meticulously documented all interactions, viewing them as significant data points integral to the analysis.

Interviews were conducted directly by the researcher in the languages chosen by the participants, with the majority opting for the Syrian dialect. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

All individuals referenced in this paper are represented by pseudonyms to safeguard the identities and information of the families. Quotations typically display their pseudonym, age as of 2022, and occupation in Syria.

The biographical evaluation method of public policies (Apitzsch et al., 2008) is employed for analysis. This approach facilitates an understanding of how policy sectors intersect within individuals' lives, influencing their trajectories. Unlike "top-down" methodologies, which often consider domains in isolation, this approach allows for a more nuanced perspective and "thick description" (Geertz, 1973).

3. Analysis

To provide a focused and meaningful comparative analysis, I have elected to concentrate on three principal dimensions: housing, language acquisition, and employment. These categories were not preselected. Instead, they emerged organically during fieldwork and through the life stories of individuals, highlighting both unique experiences and common patterns.

3.1 Housing: Restriction or Freedom?

France employs a diverse approach to asylum housing. Notably, some families arrive through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s resettlement program, guaranteeing them a place in the social housing system.

However, the majority navigate through the National Reception System (DNA). Here, the DNA directs them to structures such as Centres d'Accueil pour Demandeurs d'Asile (CADA), which acts as the primary support hub during their asylum application. The government assigns these accommodations based on availability,

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which can vary across the country. However, the limited capacity of CADAs poses a significant challenge, often forcing some asylum seekers to live in informal settlements or on the streets due to a lack of available space. Despite introducing various support programs such as HUDA (Emergency Housing for Asylum Seekers), PRAHDA (Program for the Reception and Housing of Asylum Seekers), CPH (Provisional Housing Centre), a telling statistic reveals that only 58 % of eligible asylum seekers in France (58,347 out of 100,598) are accommodated through the DNA (FrC, 2023).

Ahmet, an 18-year-old Syrian, and his family came to France in October 2018. They slept in tents, hotels, and asylum centres before finding a flat. He said, "Every morning, it was the same routine – calling 115 and praying they'd have a place for us." 115 is a French public service dedicated to emergency social accommodations. They finally found a place near Strasbourg through a Syrian friend.

Aisha, a 20-year-old from a Druze city in Syria, and her father, Mahmoud, a truck driver, experienced a unique journey to asylum. Unable to enter Europe directly due to closed borders, they fled first to Brazil and then sought asylum in Guyana, a French overseas territory. Their goal was to obtain refugee status, settle in mainland France, and eventually bring the rest of their family, including Aisha's mother and three younger siblings. Upon arrival in France in 2019, however, they discovered that they did not qualify for support from CADAs or local associations.

A local association did manage to connect them with a Syrian family willing to provide temporary accommodation for a month. After facing long waiting lists for social housing and a perceived lack of support from official channels, Aisha's family found a small flat to rent through connections within the Syrian community in France. In the case of Ahmet and Aisha, community connections fill the void left by formal systems, especially when state policies fall short of addressing immediate needs.

In contrast to France, Germany has developed policies aimed at preventing homelessness among asylum seekers, a strategy often cited as a model for other countries receiving refugees. The housing situation for Syrian refugees in Germany is complex and influenced by both federal and state policies.

New arrivals are initially accommodated in reception facilities – large communal living spaces – distributed across the federal states according to a quota system called the *Königsteiner Schlüssel*. This system takes into account the tax income and population of each state. Following an initial period in these reception facilities, refugees are usually transferred to decentralised living arrangements, commonly in shared flats, to facilitate their integration into German society.

Take Yasmina, for example, a 42-year-old former lawyer from Syria. Upon arriving in Germany in 2014, she applied for refugee status in Dortmund with the intention of reuniting with her 24-year-old daughter, Nadia, in Essen. Despite providing

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her daughter's address, Yasmina was sent to a reception centre in Giessen, 200 kilometers from her intended destination. She spent two years in the centre before receiving her residential card. During this time, she faced numerous restrictions: she could not work, study, or even travel within Germany. This lack of freedom, compounded by bureaucratic obstacles, often led to feelings of isolation and exclusion for Yasmina.

> *"The other thing that was difficult is that you feel that you don't own yourself; you feel like a prisoner; the residency circumstances were very bad; there were many strange things for us. For example, for someone like me who is very stable and self-sufficient it's hard to go live in a camp and stand in line for a meal; I'd rather stay without food. It was not easy for me." (Yasmina, 42, lawyer in Syria)*

In 2016, the German Integration Act included a *Wohnsitzauflage* (residency requirement), limiting the free movement of recognised refugees (Renner 2018). This law added an arbitrary element to the refugee experience, with only some states applying the restriction to varying degrees (Adam et al. 2019; Xenia and Kluge 2016). This law stipulates that refugees must remain in the municipality assigned to them for a minimum of three years, barring certain exceptions (Danielak, 2019).

Upon receiving his residency, Yasmina was told she was free to travel, reflecting the freedom to choose the city before 2015. However, a new statement from the German parliament restricted her movement again:

> *"I got the residency in June. I moved to Essen. She (her daughter) was living in a small studio. I stayed with her, and we started looking for a bigger house. And we applied for Ausländerbehörde, there are no appointments. You fill out an application on the internet. And as for the job center, they cannot help you until you obtain residency in this city […] There was a new statement from the German parliament, no one can move out until 3 years after obtaining residency. After this statement, I received a reply from the Ausländerbehörde telling me that unfortunately, they can't accept my papers because I am not allowed to switch cities." (Yasmina, 42, lawyer in Syria)*

The accommodation situations, as well as the residential rules and their implementation, vary across different communes in Germany. Cases exist where refugees spend only one month in a reception centre before being given their protection status, allowing them to leave. In other cases, refugees are able to live directly with their relatives.

Yasmina's first impressions of the situation for Syrian refugees in France were interesting. She noted, "There is more freedom; at least they can travel and work." This invites us to reflect on how these two systems can be interpreted. This tension between control and freedom, or between institutional structuring and human agency, underlines the complexities of refugee integration, highlighting that no single model can claim to offer a one-size-fits-all solution.

3.2 Language learning: the more hours, the better?

In France, after receiving protection, Syrian refugee parents are required to sign the republican integration contract (CIR) in the French Office for Immigration

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and Integration (OFII), which focuses on civic and language training. Children of school age are often integrated first by a specific class called UPE2A, educational units for newcomer allophone pupils.

In 2019, while I was doing the first interviews, the 200 hours course for adults, organised by OFII to an A1 level, was considered "insufficient" by refugees, with some even dropping out of the first course due to their lack of knowledge of the Latin alphabet. The content and quality of the lesson were questioned.

Salim (45, a tailor in Syria) and his family (wife and four kids) came to France in 2018 after spending three years in Lebanon. With only a middle school education and a lack of basic knowledge of the Latin alphabet, the very first lesson already set up barriers. Mixing levels with immigrants who already speak French has only added to the confusion, making it difficult for some refugees to keep up with the lessons. Salim noted:

> *"We want to learn the language to get by in everyday life. But we learned the history of the French Revolution and how French people decapitate their king, the Louis 14 or 16… sorry I forgot the number. Thanks to my Algerian colleague who translated it for me, otherwise I have no idea what the teacher is saying…basically I went to the course because it's mandatory, but I have learned nothing." (Salim, 45, tailor in Syria)*

One of the most poignant aspects of Gowayed's work (2022) is her focus on the role of host societies in shaping refugees into a form of human capital. Salim's case echoes this, as his ambitions for 'good employment' are stunted not by his professional capability but by a language barrier. Salim is being measured by one form of "capita" – his language proficiency – over other potential forms of capital like professional skills or even social contributions.

Local associations also provide language courses. However, these typically offer limited sessions, often just once or twice a week. I have accompanied several refugees to these classes. They frequently appear unstructured and inconsistent, primarily because the instructors are volunteers.

For many families, apart from their children, motivated parents learn the language through a mix-and-match approach. For example, Yazane's parents, Mohamed (50, retailer in Syria) and Jana (35, housewife), were proactive during their initial two years in France. They completed CIR courses and even sought additional lessons through associations and online platforms. Yet, two years later, their language proficiency hasn't surpassed the A2 level. One reason is the lack of structure in their learning. Another significant factor is their limited use of the language in work or social settings.

The Syrian interviewees in France who have relatives and friends in Germany often point favorably to the German case, which offers a high number of hours:

> *"You know, my cousin's family, right? They had so many free language classes, it's unreal. They even teach you the alphabet if you're starting from scratch. And now they can all chat in German, no problem. Even*

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his wife, who had a bit of a tough start, she's now speaking German fluently; everyone can speak German!" (Nour, 33, housewife)

Indeed, in Germany, integration courses consist of two parts: a language course aiming to achieve B1 level proficiency and an orientation course. The general integration course comprises 600 lesson units, with an additional 100 lesson hours dedicated to orientation courses. Following the B1 level, more advanced courses are also offered, which are complemented by numerous vocational training programs.

While statistics and research indicate a positive dynamic for Syrian refugees in the German labour market, attributable to well-structured language courses and training programs, the on-ground reality is more complex (Etzel, 2022). Many family members I encountered in Frankfurt, despite having completed B1 or even B2 level courses, still struggle with comfortable usage of the German language.

Some initially achieved B1 or B2 proficiency during their first two years but later regressed to a basic A2 level due to insufficient practice. Many work positions don't necessitate extensive use of the German language, such as positions in Middle Eastern restaurants, handicraft jobs, delivery, or construction.

Gender and age play pivotal roles in these outcomes. Women, often responsible for childcare and household tasks, frequently interact only within Arabic-speaking communities. In contrast, young refugees master the German language within a year through intensive programs. However, older refugees, particularly those between 40 and 50, find it challenging to achieve similar proficiency levels. This challenge intensifies for older refugees when there are limited opportunities to engage with the German language, either at work or with native speakers. Take, for example, Yasmina's husband, Hicham, a 48-year-old former journalist. He has abandoned his efforts to learn German, discouraged by the slim chance of finding a job in Germany akin to his previous role.

We can also consider how older refugees face a particular set of "social scripts" or societal expectations. These social scripts might include the belief that older individuals should already be established in a career or that it's "too late" for them to learn a new language effectively. Such societal assumptions can further isolate older refugees, limiting their opportunities for practice and real-world language usage, thereby negatively affecting their integration journey.

Despite the differences in systems and policies, the similarity in the situations of these families is the limited language skills of the women and older refugees. Hence, I argue that language learning is not just about the number of hours, the teaching materials, or the mandatory nature of the courses. The intensity of the course and personal effort also need to be tied to broader opportunities for educational, professional, or social integration. Such opportunities enable individuals to practice and apply their language skills in meaningful contexts.

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3.3 Access to employment: more opportunities in Germany?

In France and Germany, professional integration is guided by central institutions: Pôle Emploi in France and the Job Centre (or "Jobcenter") in Germany. The primary distinction between them lies in the scope of their services. While Pôle Emploi, the national employment agency, focuses mainly on vocational training and job guidance, Germany's Job Centre offers a broader range of services, addressing housing, language courses, financial aid, etc.

In France, once refugees secure their protection status, they can register with Pôle Emploi, which encourages them to acquire proficiency in the French language before offering job placements.

However, due to limited support in language courses, refugees are frequently directed towards sectors that do not require extensive language skills, such as delivery, factory work, or roles in restaurants.

Mohamed (50, retailer in Syria) has completed vocational training and received a certificate as a material handler. Yet he was unable to find a relevant job. He then registered as a temporary worker and often took on night shifts.

Many male members of refugee families engage in short-term contracts or register as temporary workers. Rather than waiting for job placements from Pôle Emploi, they actively seek employment through their own connections within the Arabic-speaking community, especially within the Moroccan-Algerian networks. For some refugees who lived in Turkey before coming to France, working in Turkish shops or restaurants is a preferred option.

The conventional idea that families with a higher cultural level integrate more easily is far from reality, as several cases studied have shown.

In general, craftsmen and workers quickly find employment through short-term contracts or temporary work, despite their limited proficiency in French. Nasir (43, construction worker) and his family (wife and four kids) arrived in France in 2015 through a "Visa D" (referred to as an asylum seeker visa). Despite not speaking the language, he quickly found a job in his former field in France.

However, Syrians with higher qualifications face challenges that go beyond simply mastering the language, especially when it comes to having their diplomas recognised. Mostafa, a former pharmacist, says:

> *"It is impossible to work as a pharmacist here. It is no longer possible to go back to school, and I still have my whole family to feed. You have to work, stay active. You have to know that you can't go back." (Mostafa, 38, pharmacist in Syria)*

He now works as a temporary driver for a school. Syrian professionals in domains like medicine, law, engineering, education, architecture, and finance confront significant barriers in France. Despite their valid qualifications, many face the task of navigating additional exams, certifications, or even restarting their studies. Stringent

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local regulations, combined with potential language challenges, complicate their professional integration.

While young parents like Mostafa have the courage to restart another professional life from zero, some people may prefer to remain inactive, as is the case for two doctors, Reda (50) and Ahmed (55) in Strasbourg. Reda, a former cardiologist, talks about his experience:

> *"I was the head of our department and managed more than 20 people, but here we are nobody. It's not easy to accept that after all these years of hard work, I'm suddenly nobody. I feel like my skills and experience are not valued here. I'm not sure if I have the energy or motivation to go back to school and start from scratch. It's a daunting thought." (Reda, 50, doctor in Syria)*

The logic of "first language, then work" proposed by Pôle Emploi makes no sense if an integration policy emphasises language without concrete support for employment, including recognition of diplomas, validation of prior experience, or targeted training programs.

Compared to France, Germany has taken more proactive measures to address the recognition of diplomas and qualifications of refugees. The "Recognition Act" (Anerkennungsgesetz) was established to enable professionals from other countries to have their qualifications recognised. Following the 2015 refugee influx, Germany enhanced its validation process for foreign qualifications. They introduced improved counselling, preparatory courses, and "recognition in practice" (Anerkennung in der Praxis) programs for foreign-trained professionals.

However, the procedure can be lengthy. As a result, some individuals opt for alternative vocational training to enter the labour market swiftly. Omar, who was a civil engineer in Syria, chose a different path by opening a Syrian restaurant with a friend:

> *"You can say you're an engineer, but they'll tell you there aren't job opportunities for engineers. 'What do you want to do' You have to look for something else, not just focus on engineering. For instance, if you work as a bus driver and there isn't an equivalent job available, you're typically left with two options: becoming a security guard or working in cleaning. There are distribution companies, like Amazon, for example, or warehouses where you can handle goods; there are a lot of Syrians doing. Finding a job here is also a process of lowering expectations. They don't tell you outright that there are no opportunities; it's just how the labor market operates. However, if you approach a company, and they see you're competent and perform well, they might hire you. But it's not always easy." (Omar, 40, civil engineer)*

In the fieldwork conducted in both countries, parents over 40 years old consistently face the same challenges with professional integration and social degradation.

An example of Yasmina who can only find intermittent work as a caregiver highlights the psychological impact of such situations. The individual may experience feelings of inadequacy and shame when relying on government assistance. The absence of stable employment can lead to a sense of loss and vulnerability if such assistance were to be taken away.

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"It's just so shameful to have to rely on refugee aid to make ends meet. I mean, I do have a small job now, but it's not enough to make me feel like I'm worth something. And without a stable job, I'm constantly feeling lost and in danger. I worry that if the government aid is taken away, I'll fall into uncertainty again." (Yamina, 42, lawyer in Syria)

Social downgrading can lead to a mismatch between expectations and the reality of the labour market (Pedersen, 2012), with major psychological effects on individuals.

Transitioning into the same field in Germany proves to be arduous, with limited opportunities for older individuals with extensive skills and experience. During focus group interviews, a lot of participants describe themselves as a "forgotten group".

"It is not difficult for 20- and 30-year-olds to integrate quickly into the labor market. They can learn the language quickly and start or restart a training program that lasts several years. But the labor market is quite closed for older people (over 40) with expertise and experience in high positions in their field in Syria. It is not easy to work in the same field in Germany. There are fewer opportunities for "older people with a lot of skills, experience, and expertise. It is important to consider how German integration policy can consider these groups of people. Does Germany need these experiences? How can experience teachers, engineers, and lawyers continue their lives in Germany?" (Abdulrahman, 55, project manager at a company in Syria)

In both France and Germany, language proficiency is the primary barrier to entering the job market. In Germany, language courses are offered up to the B1 level, yet fall short of the B2 proficiency required for many professions. This gap often relegates individuals to entry-level positions, disregarding their previous expertise and professional backgrounds.

As a result, skilled Syrians feel their abilities and contributions are erased due to these stringent criteria. This observation echoes Gowayed's (2022) findings, where she contrasts American and German systems, critiquing how they frequently reduce refugees to mere "human capital", valuing them based on their potential contributions to the host country.

4. Conclusion

When comparing refugee integration in Germany and France, particularly concerning housing, language learning, and employment, Germany employs a centralised approach, encompassing services from reception to the Job centre. In contrast, refugees in France must navigate through various structures, such as l'OFII, CADA, Pole Emploi, CAF (Family allowances), and numerous local entities.

In analysing the experiences of refugees, Germany's system could be perceived as one of "restriction" and "control," but simultaneously as a caring system that ensures proper accommodation for its refugees. Meanwhile, France offers "freedom of mobility," yet it's frequently censured for its perceived lack of adequate social

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support. The balancing act between integration and restriction, freedom and stability, manifests differently in each nation, resulting in varied refugee experiences.

While France has broadened its focus on language instruction and vocational training, it seems to overly emphasise language proficiency at the cost of other crucial employment supports, notably the recognition of foreign qualifications. Observing the experiences of refugees in Germany, as highlighted by Omar's and Yasmina's situations, reveals another challenge: It's not just about recognising qualifications but also about navigating the nuance of a new labour market with its inherent biases and systemic barriers. The profound emotional impact on these individuals, many of whom were respected professionals in their home countries, is profoundly felt. This disparity highlights questions about the state's role in shaping refugees' "human capital."

In both Germany and France, despite their distinct approaches to integration, refugees confront common challenges. Structural barriers, notably social downgrading, are compounded by factors such as race, gender, and age, revealing consistent issues across both systems. These challenges, deeply embedded in the nations' welfare models, highlight the need for a transition from state-centric to a more "human-centric" integration strategy. This approach should emphasise a genuine understanding of refugees' experiences, striving for their authentic well-being and inclusion.

This ongoing research has illuminated various challenges and their impacts on individual life courses, yet numerous areas warrant further exploration. Future work will delve into aspects like the education of refugee children, social interactions, and the distinct strategies families use to navigate systems, striving to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of refugee integration in these two countries.

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