

This paper was produced by Karam Alhindi, who volunteered with the economics think-tank Bruegel, in autumn 2016.

The views expressed in the text are those of the author and not of Bruegel or Tandem.

Barriers to refugees' integration into the labour market Views from Turkey and Europe

Karam Alhindi
December 2016

2011 was the year of the beginning of a new era in the Arab world firstly, and in the entire world secondly. After all the chaos and the bloodshed by the dictatorships in those countries, a grinding war started and never finished. Millions of people had to leave their houses and their country to other safe areas, such as Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Syrians were the biggest population having to flee from their country.

Bruegel is an economic think tank, based in Brussels, where I worked as a volunteer for two weeks. They invited me to do a small research project about refugees and the labour market. The main idea is to do about 30 interviews with refugees around the EU, and I asked them some questions about their situation, how much they understand the tax system in their hosting country and what barriers they are facing and that are blocking them from joining the labour market. Over a million refugees arrived in the EU in 2015, which will surely have an effect on the European economy. Also, I wanted to make a comparison between the situation for refugees in Turkey with their life in the EU. All the interviews were made by Skype or by phone calls.

Turkey:

The main location for many refugees of many nationalities (Syrians, Afghans, Iranians, Pakistanis, Palestinians ...etc.) is Turkey. Turkey is a huge country with a lot of resources, which offers a good opportunity to have a minimum standard of life. But the problem that refugees face is to find a legal way to work in the Turkish formal economy.

Turkey has made it difficult for Syrians, Palestinians and other refugees to work legally. A lot of directives have put a stop to giving them legal residency to work. For example, Syrians used to be able to go to Turkey without a visa and could make a yearly residency to work or study on Turkish soil. But a new law in 2015 said that refugees cannot have residency and Syrians need a visa to enter Turkey. That law made Syrian refugees start looking for an alternative way to have a better life. Afghans, however, came to Turkey illegally through Iran in really bad conditions. They reached Turkey and then hardly found a job even in the informal economy.

In 2015 over a million refugees arrived to Greece smuggled over land and via the sea route from Turkey, running away and hoping to find a better life in the EU. The EU is becoming the dream of refugees, because it is the place where some countries respect human rights, and respect the

treaties that they have signed. Also they are wealthy countries.

Zaher is a 30 year old Syrian man who has lived in Turkey since 2011. He works as an interpreter in Gaziantep. When we asked Zaher about the situation in Turkey, he said: "The Turkish government have made a lot of legislation to block Syrians' movements inside Turkey, so if I want to go to Istanbul, for work or to visit my friends, I need exit permission. Legally Syrians can't work at all on Turkish soil unless they have a work permit, which is kind of impossible to get."

On the other hand, in Turkey there are no cultural barriers that block refugees in working in the formal or informal economy, since for many refugees the culture is quite close to their own. However, racism is for sure one of the problems refugees are facing in Turkey, and that is what most refugees have told us through the interviews. The main sources that are feeding racism are the Turkish media and the unclear laws that Erdogan's government is passing, such as the Kimlek. Kimlek is a form of ID card that was given to some refugees without documents or without legal residency. The Kimlek should give refugees the right to access local services and to work, but the law has been poorly implemented. It should allow refugees to work, but at the time of writing, the Kimlek has not yet been activated in the Turkish administrative system. Turkish authorities have now stopped giving out the Kimlek card but kept the order that no refugee can access local and governmental services without it. This means that many refugees remain without any rights to be medically treated or to have the right to rent a house.

Nowadays, most refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq or Iran have got used to working in the informal economy, without paying taxes to the state and without helping the host community to improve. Without any knowledge about what taxes are made for, they have fled from their countries in which there was not a strong or clear tax system, to another country which is putting them in the same situation and even worse.

After all of this, when the refugee decides to leave Turkey and head to the EU, he/she really tried to build something in Turkey, but it did not work.

Europe:

According to IOM and UNHCR estimates, "around one million migrants and refugees arrived in Europe till 21 December 2015, three to four times more than in 2014. Just 3% (34,215) came by land to Bulgaria and Greece; the rest came by sea to Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus and Malta."

The refugees we interviewed were 63% male and 37% female. 73% were Syrian, 16% Palestinian, and the rest from Iraq and Senegal. More than 83 % of them want to work in the formal economy, and just 3% of them want to work in the informal economy. The rest are split between wanting to study, wanting to go back to their home country, or wanting to work in any opportunity no matter the sector. About 43% were students but because of the ongoing conflict they stopped their studies, 13% were manual workers, and the rest already have one or even two diplomas. 70% arrived in 2015, when Europe opened its borders to let refugees pass after a huge pressure from the European citizenry towards their governments. 20% of them arrived in 2014.

20% of the interviewees had a physical problem, which frequently blocked them from working in many sectors in the labour market. 36% of the interviewees felt that they do not understand the

tax system, 36% considered that they do they understand it, and the rest had some understanding.

I would like to start with Austria, because it's the first EU country that refugees should pass to reach western and northern EU. I interviewed two brothers living in Vienna, Mohamed and Fadi Al Shahbandar. Both of them they focused on racist actions that they faced and the cultural barriers or cultural clash in Austria.

Fadi a Syrian refugee who lives in Austria, said: "the problem in my feet needs a surgery, because I have an extra bone in it. I can't stand for long and I can't work so hard, so I could not find a lot of full time jobs without standing or even half time jobs, taking into account my problem. Moreover I don't have a university diploma. However, there are a lot of refugees like me here in Austria and in Europe "

The next country for refugees is Germany, the heaven on earth for many of them. A wealthy, strong, industrial country, leading the EU in the last few years. A country that has recently welcomed more than 1 million refugees from different nationalities.

We asked them about the barriers they are facing.

Hutaf, a Syrian refugee who works in the JOB CENTER in Germany: "The German wants to learn about our culture more than what we want to learn about theirs. Most Syrians after graduation go to work in the governmental sectors because the private one is super weak in Syria, but in Germany the private sector is so strong." He added also that in Germany there are studies on how to make interviews. "In our country we don't have these things, even the job and education system are totally different than Syria." He explained that because of the ongoing conflict in Syria, most of the Syrians become lazy to study, they just want to work and send money to their families. "But it does not work like that in the EU!"

And Ahmad, another Syrian refugee in Germany, agrees: "Here everything is about certification. If you don't have, you have to study again. And many refugees are rejecting this idea"

Tareq has different ideas. He focused more on the ideology of the media in Germany. For example, the events in Cologne on new year's eve 2015: "there were 10000 police men that night, is it possible that they could not control "as they said on media" some immigrants, that's impossible," he said. "Of course we have made a lot of problems, such as delaying all the time for our meetings with job center or with our social assistants, or even to cross the red line for walkers in the streets or throw waste on the floor," he added.

Khaled, another interviewee, and Tareq both agreed that racism is growing step by step in Germany.

Candrela, a young Syrian girl who lives in Hamburg, said that the only solution is to do a lot of "Awareness campaigns" regarding the arrival of refugees, because the cultural and religious rifts are putting women out of the spot of working and learning.

All the refugees I interviewed said language is the biggest barrier to joining the labour market.

En route after Germany, refugees should decide either to leave for another country or to stay there, and some of them have decided to go to Poland, a country that has been rejecting many refugees recently.

Anas is a Syrian refugee in Warsaw, Poland. Apart from the language, he says that the economy of this country is a huge challenge. They give refugees only 200 EUR/month, which is hardly enough to rent a house here, he said. Moreover, there is no working agenda or job center to help refugees find a job. Racism is also much higher than before and you can feel it in the media and in the street, he added.

Anas: "Refugees go to the black market, because they need money to stay alive and to help their families, the situation here needs a quick intervention!"

Some refugees also decided to go to France, the country which was one of the creators of the EU. But France is not in the best economic situation. I interviewed Emad and Rana, a Syrian and a Palestinian/Syrian who are refugees in France.

Emad has two diplomas (one in Economy and Trade, and one in Theater criticism) but nowadays he waits for a chance for a phone call from a farmer to work in the vineyards. "There is nothing to be ashamed about in working in any kind of job, but I am 53 years old with one kidney, so I can't work a lot in the field," he said. "They rejected to spend money on my lessons to learn French, because they think that I am too old, and I won't give anything to this country," he continued.

Rana, a Palestinian/Syrian refugee in Toulouse, was a maths teacher back in Syria. She has a cancer and she is getting medical treatment. She thinks that the French do not want to integrate refugees: "when you say that you are Muslim, you are much less likely to be offered a job. They put refugees and the illegal immigrants in small cantons, so they become radicals. Many of the young guys who live there went to the Jihad and they died in Syria, and their families here made an honorary condolence, because they are happy for the death of their men," she said. "The French authorities are pushing people to this point because they ignore them, and they are doing nothing to integrate people to make them active in the labor market," she added.

Rana: "Without integration, refugees will never be active in the French labor market."

Refugees' third direction after Germany could be Belgium, the capital of the EU and the country of beer, chocolate and frites. The country where the politicians and policymakers are working and dealing. Belgium faced a lot of refugees arriving in the big wave in 2015, and I was one of them. Everything is good for refugees in Belgium, especially if you are Syrian or Palestinian/Syrian. The other nationalities have to wait for a long long time to have their paper to be able to work, or even to be accepted as refugees.

BBC: "Official Languages in Belgium: French, Dutch and German. Walloon, the local variant of French, is used by 33% of population. Flemish is used by more than 60% of the population, and is spoken in the northern part of the country. The languages learned at school are officially labelled French and Dutch. German, spoken by 1% of population can be found in the cantons in the east

of the Walloon region. Brussels, the capital of Belgium, has two official languages: French and Dutch.

Luxembourgish is spoken by around 0.5% of the population, but the language has no official status. About 10% of the Belgian population are non-native, and languages spoken include Italian, Spanish, Greek, Arabic and Turkish."

Ziad is an Iraqi refugee in Belgium, who came with the same wave in 2015. He mentioned a lot of problems in Belgium such as language and administration. He said that refugees should study the language of the part that they want to move to, and if he found a job in the other part, he should learn the other language.

Ann, a Syrian refugee also in Belgium, said: "the integration system here is really complicated, each part has a different way of integration." "Registering in the university is kind of impossible because of their complicated rules on anything, and the social assistants have this job to help us, apparently they need help, because each time we ask them, their answer would be 'I don't know'." Sentiments echoed by Ziad and Mustafa.

Other refugees decide either to cross the sea again to the UK, or to go to the north, for example to the Netherlands, where one finds the best milk and another strong economy. However, refugees are facing clear racism in the Netherlands, especially prompted by Dutch politicians, such as Geert Wilders, who is calling on his people to reject refugees. This of course greatly affects the psychological state of refugees.

Christina, a Syrian mum of two kids, said that many refugees prefer to work in the informal economy because it's easier. "They think here in Holland that we came from the tent, and we park a camel beside it, they don't know that we are not like this, and we are educated people."

Sweden is the other big destination for refugees, the country of IKEA and strange meat balls...

"There are two kinds of markets here in Sweden, one for refugees and migrants, and one for Swedes," said Abdoul. "There is no equity in the job market here. Swedes can have the chance to work more than us for sure," he continued. "In Sweden a university degree does not help with finding a job, I know a doctor who was really a famous doctor back in Syria, here, they have found him job as wall painter," he added. "In Sweden there is cold enough to freeze their hearts and to make them useless and depressed."

Some refugees passed through Russia to Norway, the country of petrol and great nature. Tareq, a 30-year old and a lawyer back in Syria, said "the routine and bureaucracy shocked refugees, we have been waiting for a long time just to get the refugee status. I want to know what is going to happen with me so I can make a plan for my life, either I work in a factory or I register in the university to make an equivalence for my degrees and work in what I am profession." "The time that they spend on making our papers, it's enough to destroy our desire of working," he added.

The last country that refugees would like to go to is the UK, the country that 10,000 refugees in Calais were waiting to go to, at the time of writing. The UK did not say anything but instead the English authorities just spent a lot of money to build a wall, and leave these refugees in a really bad situation. But if the refugees reach there, it is quite a good life for them, as Mohamed said.

“The only problem for the refugees is to find a house to rent, other stuff like paperwork or even to study is not hard at all,” he added.

Conclusion:

In the end, the main problems that refugees are facing include: language; a lot of gaps in the integration system; educational and life mentality; acceptance of or understanding of their religions and backgrounds; the false capability of EU governments to handle this amount of refugees; racism; exploitation of refugees' need to work; and equity in the labor market.