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Photo by Yousef Mrstany

No Longer a Guest: Permitting Syrians in Sudan

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When Syrian refugees first started arriving to Sudan in 2014 they were welcomed as guests. But Sudan's economic crisis combined with Syrians' success in business has created antagonism. The transitional government has instigated a crackdown on Syrian workers and businesses, making it increasingly hard for them to make a living. A possible solution is to be found in the Jordan Compact, a new approach for how host countries and the international community can respond to protracted refugee situations.

From hospitality to hostility

Since the Syrian Civil War began nearly 10 years ago, over 11 million Syrians have been [displaced](#) from their homes. Approximately half of them have been displaced beyond Syria's borders. [Most](#) Syrian refugees have remained in the Middle East, with [smaller numbers](#) having moved on to Europe, the UK, and points beyond. By 2015, Sudan became a Syrian-refugee hosting country because it became the only country in the region that did not require visas for Syrians. Syrians in Sudan now number approximately [250,000](#). Until late-2019, Syrians were treated largely as unbothered "[guests](#)" rather than significant "residents": they were able to live, work, obtain an education and health care on par with Sudanese. Some Syrians I interviewed in 2018 indicated that they felt well-treated by the Sudanese, as they often brought higher levels of education and business acumen with them into the hosting country. This all changed with the transitional Sudanese government.

A shift in the refugee policy

The domestic ramifications of the transitional government are felt acutely by all refugees in Sudan, including the Syrians. Beginning in October 2019, the transitional government shifted national refugee policy away from the relatively "[hands-off](#)" approach of former President al-Bashir towards the mainly urban Syrian refugees (as well as other urban refugees such as Yemenis, Eritreans, and Ethiopians). They began requiring a variety of permits for refugees living in the country. The [new regulations](#) are a confusing array of bureaucratic requirements for various permits, which are all now necessary to obtain in order to legally enter the country, reside, work, seek an education, and receive health care. These various permits all require a valid Syrian passport, which is expensive if available at all. Under al-Bashir's rule and through a corrupt and nepotistic system, an estimated 10,000 Syrians [obtained Sudanese passports](#) to ensure some measure of mobility and access to the other countries of the region. The transitional government has been [reviewing and revoking](#) the nationality granted to Syrians under al-Bashir. The entire process has left Syrians bereft of previously held social and political assurances in Sudan.

Furthermore, the Sudanese populace have begun rejecting socially the Syrians in the country. One Syrian woman I interviewed in Khartoum in early 2020 expressed deep sadness that her two young children are

no longer called by name in the local elementary school by the teachers or the students, and they are merely referred to as "the Syrians." "This is new," Aya said, "I used to be able to go to the market freely. I was treated like a Sudanese. But now I am viewed with suspicion and anger. People now also say to me, 'Hey Syrian' instead of a more respectful term. People also talk about my family's need for permits now." Aya's experience of reversed treatment in Sudan is [not unique](#) among Syrians.

Aiming to slow migration

Sudan has a long history of [welcoming refugees](#). For over 30 years, Sudan has hosted refugees from Uganda, Chad, Ethiopia, Congo, and Eritrea with a "generous" refugee policy that aims to be peaceful and humanitarian, abides by non-refoulement, and pushes the goal of self-sustaining livelihoods for the refugees. Under the al-Bashir regime, being a Syrian refugee in Sudan was relatively much [easier](#): university and education at all levels were available to Syrians for the same fees as locals. Syrians were able to work, start businesses, and access health care in all the same ways as the Sudanese. Costs to open and operate new businesses were relatively low, and access to new markets was relatively open. Syrians could apply for Sudanese passports after six months in-country and typically received one within a few months, which facilitated their onward movement to other countries in the region and Europe.

There is a major effort underway to change that. The [Khartoum Process](#) (The "EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative") of 2016 was established to utilize international cooperation to slow or stall the migration between the Horn of Africa and the European Union, including routes through Sudan. The [initiative](#) utilizes job creation and educational opportunities for migrants to actively dissuade onward migration. It also includes strict border controls, provisions of humanitarian and security aid to dismantle migrant smuggling and trafficking, and a policy of "help refugees where they are." The military forces responsible for patrolling borders and hindering migration to Europe is the ruthless and violent [Rapid Support Forces](#) (the RSF, formerly known as Janjaweed). They were the culprits in the Darfur atrocities, responsible for the Khartoum massacre, and have also figured as mercenaries in Yemen on behalf of Saudi Arabia. The leader of RSF, Mohamed Hemetti, is the Deputy Head of the Transitional Military Council and in the Sovereignty Council.

Cracking down on Syrian workers

Because of the ease of entry and low threshold for engaging in everyday life, the Syrians began coming

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to Sudan in earnest in 2014. [They reside](#) primarily in the Khartoum area. Up to 90 percent of them are believed to be young men between ages 20 and 30, avoiding conscription into the Assad military in Syria. They live and work all over Khartoum, and they have congregated north of the downtown area in a suburb called Bahri Kfourri and east in an area called Riyadh.

The most common sectors of work include the service sector in restaurants, and in the transportation sector in the vehicle tire market. The two sectors are to be expected: Syrians are well-reputed for [improving the food](#) and drinks industry worldwide with [delicious native cuisine in Khartoum](#), and young Syrian men often arrived to Khartoum with experience in car repair and tire maintenance.

It was, however, because of [Sudan's economic crisis](#) coupled with the relative success of the Syrians (as well as other foreigners) in these sectors that the transitional government began to take notice and form a [“campaign to control foreign presence.”](#) According to my interviewees, the Syrian participation in the vehicle tire market was beginning to strain the Sudanese competitors, even driving some of them out of business. It drew national-level attention, and the transitional government attended to the complaints of the Sudanese business community by aiming to restrict foreign workers and Syrian participation in the sector. The transitional government then instituted a [work permit policy](#), stipulating that foreign workers including Syrians needed an employer-specific work permit. The permit costs were shouldered by the employers and were high: \$450 for a one-year permit that is tied to a single employer. The challenge, according to one tire company owner I interviewed in Khartoum, is that this raised the costs of operations for the Syrian tire companies and they were less competitive with the Sudanese operations that did not have to pay for employee work permits. The work permit system (also referred to as a [“business card”](#) system) effectively protects Sudanese-owned businesses.

From there, the transitional government began a series of [raids](#) of Syrian-specific businesses: work inspections began in September 2019. The “kesha” arrive at different times of the day and night requesting to see papers. Employees without a proper work permit are sent to prison, with bail set at between \$100 and \$200, the equivalent of one month’s salary, or more, for most Syrians in Sudan. Treatment in Sudanese prisons is bad and secretive transport of prisoners between [“ghost prisons”](#) is common, which is reminiscent of [horrific experiences](#) in Syrian detention centers for many of the Syrian youth. With the threat of deportation back to Syria looming, Syrians are, thus, keen to avoid interacting with the police and government more widely. As a result, corruption of raiding police officers, the “shofati”, is rampant. To avoid imprisonment during



Photo by Yousef Mrstany

the raids, police are willing to take anywhere from a few dollars to \$1,500, depending on the desperation of the employee. They have even come to expect the bribes, according to the Syrians I interviewed.

Barred from starting up businesses

After targeting employees, the transitional government has turned to foreign business owners. Commercial Registration Department of the Sudanese Ministry of Justice had issued a [ruling](#) that bans non-Sudanese from practicing commercial activity, including any import or export businesses. Now Syrians interested in opening businesses must have a Sudanese partner who has 51% of the company’s share that can register the company. The Sudanese partner must be Sudanese from birth, and the cost for registering the company is \$500. The company must be registered before hiring any foreign employees, who then must be provided with work permits. The startup costs have increased by thousands of dollars, effectively making it impossible for Syrians to start a business.

As a response to these regulations, Syrian businessmen in Khartoum have organized into a delegation to help low-wage Syrian men become employed, to stay out of jail, and to pay their bail for them. In early 2020, the delegation had 8 business owners in it. They had already raised enough funds to bail 15 Syrians out of jail who had been imprisoned for 10 days. The delegation and their lawyers had raised the issue of the corruption and bribes within the police to the transitional government, putting forth requests to meet with Mohamed Hemetti, and other representatives at the Ministry of the Interior, but they were refused.

As the tire company owner I spoke with said, “We are not afraid of following the law. We Syrians are happy to do it. But the Sudanese government has made us hate the situation now. Some Syrians are afraid to leave the house because they can’t pay the bribes and they can’t afford to do it the right way. The only thing worse is being deported back to Syria to face military conscription there.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Syrian refugees have captured the interest and attention of the world for nearly a decade. One of the most innovative attempts at supporting Syrian refugees and improving the conditions for the host country is the case of the [Jordan Compact](#). The Jordan Compact committed US\$1.8 billion to Jordan in grants and loans at concessionary rates, as well as favorable terms of trade with the EU. Following this, the World Bank and the Government of Jordan concluded an agreement that provides Jordan US\$300 million when it achieves a series of targets, including targets related to the number of work permits issued to Syrian refugees. As part of the Jordanian government's commitment to the international community as part of the Jordan Compact, it now regularly issues cost-free work permits for Syrian refugees, and it has guaranteed educational access for all Syrian youth within its border through the "double-shift" system, in which all public schools are dedicated for Syrian instruction in the afternoon shift.

Much has been learned from the Jordan Compact that would be applicable to the Sudanese case.

With the recent lifting of US sanctions and the normalization of relations with Israel, Sudan is poised to benefit from the support of the international community, which they can leverage in a similar means as Jordan to provide for domestic economic growth and enhanced international cooperation.

The policy implications from the learned experience of the Jordan Compact that are applicable include:

1. Reduce the number of permits required by Syrian refugees (among others) to live their daily lives in Sudan. Reducing the bureaucracy enables Syrians to access local services necessary for their livelihoods. It also reduces the social stigma that they now have encountered.
2. If a Residency Permit is necessary, make the Residency Permit a means for Syrians to access employment, education, health care, etc. Rather than issuing a series of exclusionary permits – for example, an educational permit provides access for a Syrian university student to enroll in courses for one-year, but does not allow employment – the issuance of one permit rather than multiple, short-term, and

expensive permits would improve the possibilities for Syrians to move freely between sectors and contribute to their host society more readily.

3. If a work permit is necessary, make it free, valid for longer than one-year, and available in a way that is not employer-specific. This is an adaptation from the initial issuance of the work permits in Jordan, and it has proven to be a [very positive development](#) there from which Sudan can learn.
4. Institute a quota system for the hiring of locals and Syrians, as well as other refugees, that ensures fair and proportional employment and education. If a quota system is implemented early, such efforts can help to improve the unemployment of Sudanese while simultaneously attend to the skills and offerings of the refugee communities.

In light of the [recent influx](#) of some 40,000+ refugees from Tigray, Ethiopia, the transitional government in Sudan is poised to be hosting refugees for many years to come. Thus, a systematic approach to balancing the needs for the domestic economy and Sudanese employers and employees with the needs for refugees is in order. There are [many](#) global and regional refugee and migration compacts that speak to this already in place, and the many lessons learned from them provide a sound basis for Sudan to engage in new refugee governance that is humane, equitable, and dignified.

As of December 9, 2020, Sudan joins a long list of other countries that will no longer allow Syrians into the country without a visa.