

# Egypt and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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## Egypt and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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The 2011 uprising against the regime in Syria soon transformed to a full-fledged civil war, leading to one of the worst humanitarian crises and the displacement of millions of Syrians across the globe. As of June 2021, there are 6.7 million Syrian refugees around the world, constituting twenty seven per cent of total refugees globally (UNHCR 2022b), of which 5.7 million are hosted across the MENA region in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (UNHCR Operation Data Portal n.d.). Syrian refugees constitute the largest group of refugees in Egypt; as of April 2022, there are 141,303 persons (UNHCR Operation Data Portal n.d.) representing about 50 per cent of total registered refugees in the country (UNHCR Egypt 2022).

In 2022, Egypt ranked fifth in host countries for displaced Syrians in the MENA region, following Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. While not sharing a border, Syria and Egypt had shared a unique political history with their short-lived union between 1958–1961. In this chapter, I argue that Egypt's policies towards the Syrian refugee crisis have been shaped by considerations for domestic stability and economic capacity. Like Syria, Egypt experienced mass protests in 2011, but the respective political paths of the two countries have diverged significantly. While Egypt's political turmoil resulted in regime change in 2011 and again in 2013, Syria has not experienced a regime change and slipped into civil war aided by foreign intervention from regional and international powers to its warring parties. To the Egyptian state, spillover effects from neighboring conflicts remain a clear and present danger and that fact has impacted policies regarding entry regulation of displaced persons, including Syrian refugees. Economically, the Egyptian government has worked to restore macroeconomic stability and provide appropriate services to its citizens, yet the side effects of following neoliberal international prescriptions have affected living conditions for both Egyptian citizens and Syrian refugees, as well as the state's policies towards them.

This chapter first reviews Egypt's legal framework on refugees. I then discuss the political context of the Syrian and Egyptian uprisings and how it influenced Syrians' influx into the country. The third section addresses the socio-economic experiences of Syrian refugees in Egypt. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how these experiences have been a mix of challenges and opportunities to both refugees and their host communities. The analysis is guided by reports and statistics of international organizations working with and around refugees. Unfortunately, because of the social distancing and restrictions on mobility and close interactions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the annual and biannual reports were not updated. I have sought to rely on the latest available information about the status of refugees in Egypt.

### **Egypt's Responsibility towards Refugee from Laws to Practices**

#### *The Legal Framework*

Egypt was one of two Arab states participating in the drafting committee of, and later a signatory to, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 2010). While the Government of Egypt (GoE) acceded to the Convention and its 1967 added Protocol only in May 1981, the state's responsibility towards refugees was

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referenced in Egyptian constitutions since 1953 (Sadek 2016). Article 5 of the Constitutional Declaration of February 1953 acknowledged the right of asylum in Egypt. This right was reiterated in the 1971 constitution. The 2012 constitution affirmed the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers in Article 57, prohibiting the extradition of political refugees. The current constitution of 2014 stipulates granting protection to refugees subjected to persecution in article 91 (Elshokeiry 2016, 13).

Under these conventions and constitutional frameworks, Egypt has committed to abide by the non-refoulement principle. However, the administration of asylum activities including Reception, Registration, Documentation and Refugee Status Determination (RSD) are carried out by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Cairo office at the request, and on behalf, of the government. UNHCR assists governments in finding solutions for refugees including settlement in the host country, transition to a third country or repatriation (UNHCR 2013). The UNHCR interviews persons of concern through its RSD process and provides a yellow refugee card to those who fall under the refugee status. The card is stamped by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Refugee Affairs section of the Ministry of Interior's Department of Migration and Citizenship. The UNHCR works in close collaboration with Egyptian authorities to ensure that all persons of concern are protected (UNHCR 2013, 7).

## *Refugees in Egypt*

The experiences of refugees in Egypt have varied over time and have been shaped by both the political relationship between Egypt and the country of conflict, as well as the health of the Egyptian government's purse. Palestinian refugees are considered the oldest group of Arab refugees, arriving in the aftermath of the 1948 War, and enjoying a wide range of benefits including the right to own properties, study at Egyptian universities and work. In the following years, conflicts in the MENA region increased the number of displaced persons and refugees. Through the 1950s and until the 1990s, government policies fluctuated in the level of service they provided for non- Palestinian refugees. But in 1996, Presidential Decree 8180 gave refugees a renewable three-year temporary residency permit to be issued by the Ministry of Interior (Elshokeiry 2016, 13) and the state's provision of public services was extended to displaced persons from neighboring Arab countries. Although Egypt made a reservation to article 22, section 1 of the Refugee Convention, thereby denying refugees the right to be admitted to public schools, the Egyptian Minister of Education (MoE) issued Ministerial Decree No. 24/1992, allowing the children of recognized refugees to attend public schools (Sadek 2016). At different times, the decree allowed children of Sudanese, Libyan, Iraqi and later Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees to access Egypt's public educational system.

## **Syrian Refugees in Egypt post 2011 Uprisings: The Political Context**

Both Syria and Egypt were grounds for mass protests in 2011 but each country experienced a distinct trajectory. The January 2011 Egyptian Uprising led to a regime change and the ouster of President Mubarak in February of the same year to be followed by another mass protest that ousted President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 with the state – backed by the military – regaining much of its strength since then. Syria on the other hand, has experienced a protracted civil war. Despite support to anti-regime factions from Western and Arab countries at the onset of the civil war, Russian and Iranian political and military backing to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (r. 2000–) has prevented the fall of his regime. Syria's lack of strong state institutions, the fragmentation of the military and plethora of armed actors in an ethnically divided society all provided favorable conditions that shifted the Syrian Uprising to an ongoing conflict zone.

The ebb and flow of Syrian refugees' movement into Egypt has followed not only the civil war, but also the political change in Egypt. The Egyptian administration that came to power with the election of President Mohamad Morsi (r. 2012–2013), a Muslim Brotherhood leader, welcomed the influx of Syrians fleeing the conflict as refugees, asylum-seekers, and residency- seekers. On 15 June 2013, Morsi announced the breaking off of diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime, promised financial aid to the Syrian rebels, and pledged support from both Egyptian society and military. He expressed his plans to work with other countries, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and the Red Crescent, in cooperation with civil society organizations, to coordinate Egypt's assistance to rebels in Syria and Syrian refugees residing in Egypt. While stressing his rejection of western political or military interference in the conflict, President Morsi called on the international community to implement a no-fly zone over the conflicted country

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(Mohsen 2013). The announcements came as he faced strong domestic opposition to his rule. The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on his policies came under fire from non-Islamist opposition that had mobilized against and successfully ousted Mubarak a year earlier (Ahrum Online 2013), as well as Islamist Salafi groups who felt marginalized by the Muslim Brotherhood's monopolization of power (Hendawi and Michael 2013). At the same time, many Egyptian activists, politicians and state officials were alarmed by how the Syrian Uprising had shifted to sectarian violence and cautioned against taking sides that can be too costly to Egypt (Witte 2013). Mass protests against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood broke out on 30 June 2013. Courted by the military as well as other state and society institutions, the protests led to the ouster of Morsi from power on 3 July 2013 and the overt return of the military to power (Hanna 2013).

In the following months, Egypt's governmental policies on open borders to Syrians shifted as the interim government of Judge Adly Mansour (2013–14) tightened its grip on border security. Policies on entry included re-instating some restrictions that the Egyptian government had lifted in 2012. In July 2013, Syrian nationals were asked to secure a visa before entry and those already in the country have been asked to renew their residency permits in a timely fashion. Despite announcements by Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time that these requirements were related to 'current and temporary' security conditions (Kortam 2013), these measures remain in place till the time of writing this chapter. However, some Syrians are still allowed to enter on the basis of family reunification (UNHCR Egypt 2020b), and the government continues to work with UNHCR on the registration of refugees and asylum-seekers.

## The Syrian Refugees in Egypt post 2011 Uprisings: The Socio-Economic Context

Unlike other neighboring MENA countries, Egypt does not confine Syrian refugees to living in camps. Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, as well as those on visitor or student visas, are free to reside, intermingle and travel freely within the country. They tend to concentrate geographically in the major cities of Cairo, Alexandria, and Damietta. They have access to many public services especially education and health on equal footing with Egyptians. While enjoying freedom of movement and residency, the refugees face social and economic hardships resulting from their displacement as well as the impact of the economic structural adjustment policies that the Egyptian government continue to implement. According to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), almost one-third of Egyptians live below the national poverty line (A.Moneim 2020), and earlier estimates show that 67 per cent of Syrian refugees in Egypt are extremely poor and in need of financial assistance (UNHCR Egypt 2020b). With the devaluation of the Egyptian pound in 2016 and again in 2022, inflation and soaring consumer prices has taken its toll on both Egyptian citizens and Syrian refugees.

The sustainable development goals of the government's 2030 Vision, which was announced in 2016, aim to couple macroeconomic stabilization policies with safety net programs, such as *Takaful and Karama*. Since 2016, the UNHCR and other international agencies working with Syrian refugees have aimed to align assistance efforts with the government's *Takaful and Karama* projects in order to improve the quality of life for refugees and their host communities. These efforts include partnering with government ministries to streamline aid and establish a 'one-refugee' policy. The 'one refugee' approach is a Response Plan for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers from sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq, Yemen, and 50 other countries that was launched in 2018, and revised in 2019 by UN and other international and national non-governmental organizations in collaboration with the government. The response plan aimed to continue addressing the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers (UNHCR Egypt 2019).

As a relief partner, the World Food Program (WFP) has been especially active in extending cash assistance as well as food for children in primary schools. While WFP extends support to all refugees in Egypt, Syrian refugees have received a significant portion of its relief efforts. Since 2019, WFP has supported 78,000 Syrian refugees out of 117,000 total aid recipients. This amounts to 36 per cent of the Syrian refugee community receiving monthly humanitarian cash assistance, and 58 per cent receiving food vouchers. The WFP provides monthly cash-based transfers (CBT) of EGP 400 (equivalent to USD 24) to support nutritional needs of Syrian pregnant and lactating women on the condition of regular medical check-ups for themselves and their child at participating health centers. Similarly, beneficiaries targeted through livelihood support activities receive monthly household assistance of EGP 2,000 upon completion of the training courses (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 51–53). In addition, WFP's National School

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Feeding Programme, a key social safety net, has provided nutritious meals to school children. It also engaged in capacity building activities for their teachers through various trainings on nutrition, emergency preparedness and positive discipline as well as renovating school facilities to encourage children to attend schools (United Nations 2019).

Many displaced Syrians who moved to Egypt since the start of the conflict are white collar professionals who are trained in accounting, engineering, medical, legal, and education professions. However, governmental regulations of work and residence permits, which are often contradictory and ambiguous, limit their ability to secure appropriate employment opportunities, thereby increasing their sense of insecurity.

While asylum-seekers and refugees have the right to wage earning employment and self-employment in Egypt, these rights are governed by Egypt's domestic employment legislation, which puts a 10 per cent quota of foreign labor (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 43). The government also requires work permits and regulates their issuance through the Ministry of Manpower (MoM) prior to work. Refugees seeking employment have to qualify with the MoM's terms, which included qualifications and experience, and the employer's need for such. Article 11 of Ministerial Resolution 390 of 1982 issued by the Ministry of Manpower, requires proof on the part of the employer that no Egyptian national is available to do the same work before permits may be issued. In addition to these requirements, refugees need to pay annual permit fees (UNHCR 2013). The ability to find stable work is further complicated by the government's regulation of refugees' residency. According to the Ministry of Interior's Decree No. 8180 of 1996, refugees generally receive a three-year temporary residency permit. Such permits are renewable if the refugee 'remains of concern to UNHCR' (Sadek 2016). However, this decree is not being implemented, because of another ministerial regulation that limits refugees to only six-month renewable residency permits.

With short-term residencies and constraints on the issuance of work permits, many resort to the informal economy. Syrian refugees living in Egypt primarily work in three main economic sectors: Food (restaurants and food processing), furniture production, and textile (ready-made garments). (UNOCHA 2017, 91). UN reports show that 80 per cent work mainly in the informal food service and therefore face high worker turn-over and a lack of required skilled workers (International Labor Organization 2018).

In terms of education, the Egyptian government allows Syrian refugees to attend public schools on equal footing with Egyptian nationals. This access is extended to all stages and types of education, including vocational and technical schools, as well as higher education institutions. For the academic year 2018/2019, the Ministry of Education (MoE) reported that approximately 42,300 Syrian students, both registered and not registered with UNHCR, were enrolled in public schools. In addition, an estimated number of 6,800 Syrian youths attended Egyptian public universities and higher education institutes. While enrollment rates are high – about 90 per cent of refugee children are enrolled in the school system per UNHCR survey of 2019 – Syrian refugee children face the same challenges facing Egyptian school children in particular overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and long distance to schools. In addition, Syrian children face the challenges of dialect (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 23-30).

The UNHCR has been working with the MoE to improve the education services provided to children with special needs from both the refugee and the host communities. These initiatives allow Syrian children with disabilities to have access to inclusive schools close to areas of residency, in addition to specialized private schools that meet their educational and care needs. These children receive special education grants to cover school fees, transportation, and other specialized services.

Due to the dire economic situation facing many refugee families, some children drop out of school to help contribute to family income. A 2019 survey by UNHCR found that 10 per cent of all Syrian refugee children were not enrolled or are attending school less than three times per week. Disability, general poverty, child labor, distance to available schools or overcrowded classrooms in public schools were among the key reasons indicated by families for refugee children to drop out of school (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 4). In a way to remedy some of these challenges, the Egyptian government has agreed to allow Syrian community schools to operate. These schools host approximately 7,300 refugee children and they employ about 2,000 Syrian teachers (UNOCHA 2017, 91). These community schools allow refugee children to be taught the Egyptian curriculum and be officially enrolled in local public schools while

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being taught by Syrian teachers, which eases the dialect gap. In many ways, these community schools provide both education and counseling opportunities to children and youth, and employment to adult refugees. In these schools, children receive psycho-social support providing a much-needed service to traumatized children. However, these schools charge fees that while less than what is charged by private Egyptian schools can be a burden to destitute refugee families (Allam 2016, 39). In many cases, UNHCR provides financial support to cover some of these fees. The UNHCR gives education grants to approximately 55,000 Syrian refugee boys, girls, and youth upon enrollment in kindergarten classes, primary, and secondary education, and providing proof of regular attendance. These education grants are distributed according to the school year, school type, and the grade of the student, and are meant to help with school fees, uniforms, books, and transportation to schools. Children from destitute families who are unable to afford their school fees, even after receiving such grants, are offered additional means between US\$ 100–147 on a case-by-case basis (UNHCR Egypt 2020b).

Other efforts focus on transferring Syrian educational and professional certifications under Egypt's current law and practice, as well as vocational training to Syrian refugees (UNOCHA 2017, 91). Since 2014, UNHCR in cooperation with other international and local organizations have been working with the Egyptian Ministry of Education to support training of teachers and social workers, construction and upgrading of classrooms, and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, as well as provision of teaching and learning materials. These capacity-building measures in areas with the highest concentrations of Syrian refugees, aim to improve educational services offered to their children, and children of their host communities. Such efforts support a school-based reform model that provides stakeholders, such as teachers, social workers, students, parents and community leaders, with a voice and opportunities to improve the education process in their districts.

Refugees' access to higher education is more challenging as the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) requires secondary school certificates for admission to colleges and universities and continues to accept Syrian diplomas regardless of the year they were obtained. While the government allows displaced Syrians, irrespective of their legal status, or access to education, the biggest challenge is the financial burden especially as the government faces surmounting challenges to its ability to provide for its own citizens. As of January 2016, the MoHE issued a decree specifying that only Syrian refugees who obtained their secondary school certificates from an Egyptian public school will be granted access to universities on the same footing as Egyptians. Syrian refugee youth with a secondary school certificate from Syria need to pay 50 per cent of the foreign student fee reaching over US \$2,500 annually. All other Syrian youth with a secondary school certificate obtained outside of Egypt or Syria need to pay the full fee charged to non- Egyptian students on an annual basis. While resources to assist Syrian refugees in higher education exist, their supply remains very limited compared to the demand. The Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) is one resource that continues to provide scholarships for tertiary education to refugee youth of all nationalities. The total number of Syrian refugees benefiting from this scholarship for academic year 2019– 2020 reached 500. In addition, UNHCR continues to support through scholarships four students enrolled in the Egypt Japan University of Science and Technology in Burg El Arab, Alexandria. Approximately 2,400 higher education students need such support. For the 2019–2020 academic year, UNHCR received over 1,000 applications for the DAFI Scholarship – while only 150 slots are available.

Syrian refugees have access to the national health care system. Decree 601/2012 by the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) has allowed Syrian refugees' access to the health care system on equal footing to Egyptians. Since 2012, primary health care was particularly enhanced through various partnerships and signed memoranda between the government and international organizations in particular UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA, and WHO to establish resilience plans (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 33). The resilience projects aim to alleviate the austere conditions facing both the refugees and their host communities and enhance the health care service provided to them. More attention is given to children and adolescent, reproductive and mental health as well as emergencies and referral care management.

The Egyptian Red Crescent, in cooperation with the UNHCR, provides Syrian families with cash assistance grants. In 2015, about 15,500 refugees received such grants, 12,000 of whom were Syrian refugees. Refugee families that are not currently receiving food or cash assistance and are large-sized, single-headed households or households with members suffering from a medical condition are the main recipients of these cash assistance grants (Sadek

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2016). In 2018, Egypt adopted the National Health Insurance Law, which stipulates that refugees can enjoy health insurance services within specifically devised insurance schemes (Law 2/2018 on Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme). In addition, refugees from all nationalities, including Syrian refugees, were included in the nationwide presidential initiative “100 Million Health” for hepatitis C screening and treatment as part of enhancing universal health coverage in 2019. This national initiative has been part of the WHO-led Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All.

Despite these efforts, Syrian refugees still face some financial burdens related to health care. Out-of-pocket expenses, which are estimated to be at 30 per cent of medical care and apply equally to citizens and refugees alike, high medicine high prices, and hospital care costs are some of the big burdens (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 33–34). The majority of Syrian refugees in Egypt (about 67 per cent) are considered vulnerable, and a 2018 World Health Organization assessment of health status and health needs of displaced Syrians in Egypt showed that 82 per cent reported a family member’s need for medical services with 48 per cent relying on the public health sector, 18 per cent on private health facilities and 12.7 per cent on non-governmental organizations. The main factor determining refugees’ choice has been the affordability of those services (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 33–34).

## Syrian Refugees in Egypt: Challenges and Opportunities

Egyptian policies towards refugees have been greatly influenced by both the state’s political objectives and financial ability. Unlike other countries that share borders with Syria, Egypt has been able to control the influx of Syrian refugees through some measures, in particular rules of entry and exit. This has mitigated the ‘hosting fatigue’ that is more visible in other countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, as they deal with the fallout from the Syrian refugee influx for decades (Sullivan and Hawkins 2019, 246).

The unstructured movements that ensued following the Arab Uprisings, coupled with failure to secure borders in several Arab countries has led to an increase in illegal migration across the Middle East as well as from the region to neighboring European countries. This made Egypt a country of origin, a country of transit and a country of destination for illegal migration (Reda 2019). The permeable borders posed security threats to Egypt on two levels. On one level, it allowed the influx of not only peaceful refugees, but also militant groups that trickled from the country’s eastern and western borders with attempts to build bases on Egyptian soil. On another level, refugees, including Syrians, used Egypt as a stop on their illegal migration to European countries (Walker 2014).

Western opposition to the overt intervention of the Egyptian military into politics and removal of an elected president in 2013 strained the relationship between the new Egyptian regime and Western donors. This prompted President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (r. 2014-) to pay special attention to improving relations in areas of cooperation, of which border security issues remains an important issue. Since 2016 Egyptian Law-enforcement authorities have taken strong measures on both counter trafficking and counter smuggling, and succeeded in limiting illegal entry into, and exit out of, the country. The Sisi regime’s policies proved successful in curtailing violent extremism spillover from neighboring conflict areas and establishing itself as a trusted partner to European countries across the Mediterranean in the fight against illegal migration. By cracking down on smuggling gangs on the western and northern Mediterranean borders (EIMoly 2015), international partners have supported Egyptian efforts to curb activities of criminal migration networks and domestic laws’ attention to protection of victims. In 2018, officers from the UN’s International Organization of Migration lauded the state’s crackdown on state officials accused of helping smuggling networks (Reda 2019). Other policies included providing employment opportunities and social welfare to Egyptian provinces with a history of illegal youth emigrating. The policies were praised for bringing levels of illegal immigration to almost zero at the beginning of 2020 (Al-Youm 2020; CGTN Africa 2020).

In addition to state policies, several national and international NGOs work to improve refugees’ living conditions, their professional training and relationships with host communities. These organizations include UNHCR and ILO which provide employment training. Syrian NGOs have helped connect business entrepreneurs from both countries. The Syrian Business Association in Egypt has assisted refugees to establish businesses, providing guidance and counseling on official regulations, market trends, and asset management. Syrian businesses have partnered with Egyptian counterparts to minimize bureaucratic red tape and allow for smooth operation in accordance with Egyptian

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governmental rules (Startup Scene 2017).

In addition, Syrians themselves have launched initiatives focused on assisting refugees with school registration, access to health and housing, and employment skills. *Khatwa* or Step, is one initiative founded by Syrian university students to explain the process of university and K-12 school registration. By acting first as an information resource and later as an intermediary between the displaced population and Egyptian authorities, *Khatwa* managed to make registration less strenuous. Other initiatives have collaborated with *Terre des hommes* to provide psychological support and career advancement skills to displaced Syrians. This refugee-to-refugee service has been effective in reaching out to groups while understanding the daily pressures and challenges they face. *Fard*, or an Individual, is another civil society organization focused on providing solutions to socio-economic problems – especially in housing and protection, childcare, and income generation for women who work from home. Care is also another active organization that has focused on engaging with issues related to sexual and gender-based violence by providing educational seminars and psychological support to traumatized women (Allam 2016, 115–22).

Institutions in the higher education field have been also active in reaching out to the Syrian refugee community. In 2019, the Arab Academy for Science Technology, and Maritime Transportation (AASTMT), partnered with UNHCR to launch vocational training courses in linguistics, business management and entrepreneurial skills for Syrian refugees and youth from host communities (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 53). The Sawiris Foundation for Social Development, a private philanthropy, has also partnered with UNHCR in 2020 to provide aid to Syrian refugees and families (UNHCR Egypt 2020a).

While the country at large remains hospitable to foreign nationals fleeing conflict, much of the status of incoming displaced persons relies on their financial outlook. Like Iraqi refugees and displaced persons who fled Iraq following the US invasion in 2003, Syrians who moved to Egypt since 2011 feature many educated and established entrepreneurs who injected capital into the Egyptian market. The presence of displaced Syrians bears positive consequences to both the fleeing community and their host country on the economic level. Many Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers arrive in Egypt with prior work experience, vocational expertise or strong higher education records and therefore can contribute substantially to the Egyptian economy (International Labor Organization 2018). By some estimates, the total capital invested by Syrians and their Egyptian partners between 2011 and 2019 has been estimated at nearly \$800 million, though this is likely an underestimate as Syrian businesses frequently do not register or partner with Egyptians and register under an Egyptian name. Ranging from large factories to microenterprises in diverse sectors – including garment and textiles, food industry, and IT firms – these businesses employ Egyptians and Syrians.

While facing challenges to securing long-term residency permits amid the visa regulations, Syrian entrepreneurs still managed to start economic activities, with many catering to the needs of the Egyptian market (Noureldin 2019). The Egyptian market has been an attractive place for Syrian business due to its size, supply chain, and a pre-existing Syrian business community (e.g., there is a Syrian Business Association and multiple Syrian-managed NGOs). In addition, Egyptian society has been welcoming to Syrian business and products ( UNOCHA 2017, 91). The Egyptian economy has also benefited from international aid earmarked for refugees living in Egypt. Since it started assisting refugees from Syria in 2013, WFP Egypt has supported the Egyptian economy by injecting US \$172.4 million through cash-based transfers (CBT), the voucher program, local food procurement and other expenditures (UNHCR Egypt 2020b, 52). Despite funding challenges imposing the prioritization of WFP's humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable refugees starting in August 2021, WFP reached over 125,000 refugees and asylum seekers with cash assistance to secure their basic food needs. WFP was able to re-launch unconditional nutrition cash assistance for about 3,500 pregnant and lactating refugee women in the last quarter of 2021, following a one-year halt due to funding shortages (World Food Programme 2021).

Gender-related issues remain a concern for displaced populations. Syrian women and young girls continue to bear the brunt of the civil war in their country. A study by the Arab Women Organization in 2016 has documented the challenges that females face in the Arab world, including Syrian refugees. In addition to problems of displacement, impoverishment and loss of homes, women face issues of physical and sexual-based violence during their flight and many times during their temporary residence in host countries. Others suffer from increasing issues of domestic

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abuse when husbands are unable to protect and/or provide for the family. Younger women are wed off at a younger age to decrease the financial burden on the family and/or to delegate the process of social and physical protection to another person (Allam, 2016). In Egypt, displaced Syrian women have highlighted their problem with verbal harassment and protection in city streets, a problem that they note was uncommon in Syrian society. Egyptian women have been equally facing this challenge in the past decades. One of unintended consequence of this problem has been Syrian women's break out of social norms that previously limited their voice in public space. Some women reflecting on this problem highlighted that living in Egypt allowed them to stand up for themselves and break a seal of shyness to fend for themselves on the street (Allam 2016).

On the economic level, an ILO study found that female participation in the foodservice industry, which is the dominant economic activity of Syrian refugees, is very limited. Most Syrian women prefer to work from their homes to avoid harassment at work and on the street, and long commutes (International Labor Organization 2018). Syrian women note that they were not used to working in Syria as men were the breadwinners of their households (Allam 2016). With changes in their economic status after displacement, many women find themselves pushed to the workforce to make ends meet. In that regard, their engagement in the textile and garment-making sector seems to be more favorable due to the sector's flexibility to their needs, in particular the ability to work from home.

## Conclusion

While the life of refugees in Egypt is far from ideal, Syrians have received relatively better treatment compared to other refugees in the country. Historically, the Egyptian government has been more hospitable to Arab refugees compared to other nationals. As a legal expert notes, the baseline for granting asylum is everybody, then the government gives to nationalities on the basis of them being Arabs, they are seen as brothers or sisters (Elshokeiry 2016). In addition to governmental policies, assistance given to Syrians Refugees by international organizations working in Egypt has been bigger compared to other refugees. This can be explained by the dire conditions under which Syrians fled their country. One example is the winter assistance, a one-time grant distributed among the most vulnerable refugees registered with UNHCR to purchase basic items as a means to overcome the coldest months of winter in Egypt. In 2016, UNHCR assessed that a total of 85,000 vulnerable Syrian refugees needed assistance during the winter months. In coordination with UNICEF, UNHCR provided cash grants to some 61,000 Syrian refugees and 8,500 African and Iraqi refugees, and about 24,000 Syrians with children under 18 were assisted by UNICEF. While African and Iraqi beneficiaries received EGP 200 per person, Syrian refugees received EGP 300 per person (UNHCR Egypt 2016).

Reports from international organizations have shown that there is improvement in their living conditions. Some estimates had shown that 67 per cent of Syrian refugees in Egypt are extremely poor and in need of financial assistance (UNHCR Egypt 2020b). However, more recent reports show that poverty levels are less prevalent among Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2022a, 9). The number of Syrian refugees in Egypt will continue to be impacted by the political conditions of the civil war and the ability of the fleeing population to repatriate. However, the economic conditions will also play an important factor in their residency situation. To the extent that displaced Syrians will be able to find employment opportunities, a hospitable environment for their businesses, and uninterrupted education for their children, Egypt will continue to be a favored destination.

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