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UNSETTLING: THE REAL INFLUX OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

Isabel M. Riofrio
Cuny Graduate School of Journalism

KanyaKrit Vongkiatkajorn
CUNY Graduate School of Journalism

Marguerite Ward
CUNY Graduate School of Journalism

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The debate over incoming Syrians swirls around the additional 10,000 officially designated refugees the Obama administration plans to accept annually, but the actual number of Syrians heading to the United States includes thousands more than just those officially labeled refugees -- and those arrivals face uncertainties both about support for their transition, as well their future in America.

President Obama's controversial plan to allow more Syrian focused on those designated as refugees. A refugee, in those terms, is someone first deemed by the United Nations to be a victim of war, famine or natural disaster, eligible to maybe move to another country. The United States undertakes a long series of evaluations and background checks before accepting a refugee. The process may take two years.

But the actual number of Syrians fleeing the conflict and heading to the United States is more than those 10,000. The United States expects 10,000 more are eligible under a visa program that allows prolonged stays but is coupled with a far more uncertain path to citizenship. This is known as Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and allows migrants to seek jobs and remain in the United States for a limited time, but they are not eligible for citizenship nor for social services like medical assistance. The status would allow them to remain at least until September 2016, and that deadline may well be extended by the Obama administration.

In addition, other Syrians are hoping to migrate through more traditional avenues available to immigrants, such as applying for green cards as a path to citizenship. None of these people qualify for US government financed refugee assistance, and they face an uncertain future.

Take the case of Ghada Mukdad. The middle-aged woman is married with three sons. She enjoyed a life living in Al-Hasakah, a Syrian city along the Turkish border, married to a doctor. Eight years ago, she even ran for a seat in the Syrian parliament.
She advocated for expanded civil rights and expanded education. She was even so bold as to send Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a letter seeking school reforms. She never got a reply, though later Assad’s wife promised changes that never materialized.

Then the war broke out.

Now, Al-Hasakah is largely under the control of Kurdish forces and its allies. A smaller section remains under Syrian government control. ISIS gained a foothold in the summer of 2015, but its fighters were expelled shortly afterward. Mukdad is one of an estimated 120,000 who fled from the city during the war so far.

She blames the government for fostering ethnic divisions but insisted she does not take sides in the conflict. “I don’t want to take any position, not the one of the opposition or Bashar’s,” she said. Instead, she wishes the city could return to people of different backgrounds getting along. “We lived in tolerance, in love.”

She had traveled to the United States several times before the war, visiting family in Texas, and journeying there and in Southern California. She made the trips on a tourist visa. Finally, on a visit in 2012, as the war was intensifying in its early stages, she decided to remain.

In March 2012, the United States placed people like Mukdad under TPS. Unlike officially designated refugees, they do not have a clear path to citizenship. They do not have access to government-funded relocation services. They do have a right to remain here, at least until September 30th, 2016, though that date may get pushed back depending partly on the war.

The United States has given several opportunities for those who traveled here like Mukdad to obtain temporary protective status. In all, an estimated of 5,000 individuals benefited from TPS status from March 2012, eligible for re-registration,
and other 5,000 individuals were expected to file an initial application on the registration period that opened up between January and July 2015, this according to documents from the Federal Register.

A neighbor helped Mukdad obtain temporary protective status for herself and her family. Others in Arlington helped her shop for groceries and establish a banking account. Her sons are in local schools and have received constant support from their teachers and counselors.

Mukdad works hard at making the transition to life in the United States. “Life changed automatically. You have to think you are here now,” Ghada said. She got involved in the community and started volunteering at a nearby Catholic church. She also helps at a Syrian refugee group.

“This was the first step to start my new life, building my life by volunteering,”

Very few of the people she knew remained in Al-Hasakah. She finds herself trying to make sense of the tumultuous events. “What happened to Syria?” she said. At the same time, her future in the United States remains uncertain. Whenever the country decides to end its Temporary Protected Status for Syrians, Mukdad and her family could well be forced to leave. That leaves her worried with uncertainty. “We don’t know what will happen tomorrow,”

TRADITIONAL GREEN CARD APPLICANTS

Still other Syrians are trying to enter the United States through more traditional routes, applying for green cards while overseas. Rasha Hamwi, 30, and her husband Amr, 34, live in Turkey but are trying to move to the United States, where Rasha’s mother-in-law became a citizen in 2014. She works in Turkey for a development organization.
During a telephone interview, she described her time in Turkey as peaceful, but she fears the calmness could deteriorate in the face of pressures from the more than 4 million who have crossed over from Syria to neighboring countries.

“Turkey is just a stop,” she said.

She hopes to come to the United States but that is proving difficult. She and her husband applied for a green card, and spent about $5,000 on services and paperwork. Their application was denied. A green card would allow them to migrate and become citizens, but without any designation as a refugee. They plan to try again.

Their path has been long. In 2013, Rasha left Damascus to Iraqi Kurdistan. That is where she met her future husband, Amr, a Syrian who also fled there during the war. They met on a hiking trip, soon got married in Lebanon, and planned to leave Iraq.

“We decided that one of us was going to smuggle to Europe and once there ask for the other one,” Rasha said. But they decided the journey by sea would be too dangerous. Rasha looked for other ways to make the trip and contacted a smuggler.

“He was kind of cheaper than others. When I talk about ‘cheaper,’ it was at that time $10,000 in 2014,” she said. "But we had no choice at that time. We wanted to spend all of our savings just to have a better chance to start again."

She hoped to reach Sweden. Instead she was stopped at a Turkish airport.

While the couple does not plan to remain in Turkey, they do not intend to seek refugee status through the United Nations process.

“In general I have very low faith in the UN system, I don't like it. It's slow," Amr said.

But they remain on edge, worried if tensions will rise in Turkey, a concern made
more palpable by recent suicide bombings. "We don’t have any place to go if the situation changes in Turkey," Rasha said.