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Forced Migration: A Syrian Exodus to Germany

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Forced Migration:
A Syrian Exodus to Germany

Taylor Witt

German 449 – Independent Study

Dr. Nadja Krämer
Abstract

The Syrian Civil War has killed over 500,000 people and displaced over 12 million since it began in 2011. The conflict has resulted in forced migration on a massive scale. Syrian people have been displaced within Syria, to the surrounding Arab states and to Europe. This has led to a migrant crisis in some parts of the European Union. Germany has become a primary destination for these refugees, but nationalist, xenophobic forces have started pushing back against what is perceived to be an invasion of foreigners into their land and their borders. This project examines the sentiments of German citizens leading up to the peak of the crisis in 2015, and how those sentiments have changed since then. I seek to answer the question of how Syrian refugees are integrating within the borders of Germany by analyzing the actions and reactions of those involved when two distinguishable cultures meet. By considering their expressions, such as the artwork created by Syrian artist Manaf Halbouni and the policy agendas set by a German political party, this project reveals the complex intercultural relationship between Syrian refugees and Germans, people who have more in common than it may initially appear.
Introduction

"Wir schaffen das“ / “We can do it” declared German Chancellor Angela Merkel to her citizens, and to the world, in reference to accommodating the influx of refugees at the height of Europe’s so called migrant crisis in 2015 (McGregor). Attributed as the primary cause of the crisis, the Syrian Civil War has forcibly displaced more than 12 million people since it began in 2011 (“Global Trends” 3). In response to the unprecedented number of asylum applications lodged within the European Union in 2015, Merkel’s government made the decision to suspend an integral EU asylum regulation when dealing with Syrian refugees. At a time when displaced people number at over 68.5 million worldwide, Merkel’s decision was an inspirational showing of moral leadership by arguably the most powerful leader in Europe (“Global Trends” 3). Germany seemed poised to set a Western World standard in handling humanitarian crises of this scale. I seek to answer the question of how Syrians are integrating into German society in the time since 2015. By analyzing the actions and reactions of those involved, this project reveals the complexities of the intercultural relationship between Germans and Syrian refugees.

Background of Political Events

The Syrian Civil War began during a period of immense hope for much of the Arab world, succeeding a wave of pro-democratic protests incited in the name of the so called “Arab Spring” movement. Many view the December 17, 2011 self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi as the catalyst for this movement. Arab Spring galvanized the region as it sought to lead oppressed people out from under the authoritarian boot that had been holding them down for years, sometimes decades (“Arab Spring”). In this spectacular
showing of solidarity, expressed through numerous popular uprisings, a unified voice of Arab people calling for democratic reform collided with the power of authoritarian strongmen. In Tunisia, Jordan, and Syria, these uprisings experienced drastically different levels of success in influencing tangible change (“Arab Spring”).¹ Looking at the successes in Tunisia and Jordan provide a reliable lens through which we can view the consequences that have played out in Syria.

In Tunisia, the ruling regime of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was toppled entirely after more than 20 years in power. In the weeks following Bouazizi’s protest, uprisings spread from the remote town of Sidi Bouzid all the way to the heart of Tunisia’s capital in Tunis (El Khawas 10). By January 14, 2011, realizing the sheer force of the movement he faced, Ben Ali stepped down as President and fled to Saudi Arabia (El Khawas 10). To the dismay of many Tunisians, he was replaced by his Prime Minister, Mohammed Ghannouchi, and a conglomerate of former Ben Ali regime officials (El-Khawas 10). Unhappy with this simple shakeup of cabinet officials, the protests persisted, showing no sign of settling for anything less than complete turnover of all ministerial positions. By February 27, 2011, after months of unrelenting protest, the demands of the people were met and Al-Baji Gaed Essebsi, a former Tunisian foreign minister in the 1980s, was appointed to an interim Prime Minister role until a new government could be established for the people, by the people (El-Khawas 13). By October of 2011, the Tunisian Higher Election Authority had set up the first reliably democratic election since before Ben Ali seized power 20 years ago (El-Khawas 14).

¹ For an in-depth analysis of the causes and immediate effects of the Arab Spring movement across the Arab World, see Sadiki 63-187.
Elsewhere, complete coups were warded off by the promise of change. In Jordan, in response to Jordanians clashing with security forces in their fight for constitutional reform, King Abdullah II begrudgingly fired Prime Minister Samir al-Rifai, who headed a parliament subservient to the King (Yitzhak 30). The king appointed Marouf al-Bakhit as his replacement, stating his mandate was “to take practical, quick, and tangible steps to launch true political reforms, to enhance Jordan’s democratic drive, and to ensure safe and decent lives for all Jordanians” (Yitzhak 30). While the people’s demand for a new Prime Minister were met in full, Yitzhak explains that the king still holds the “power to dissolve parliament and legislate himself in the absence of a parliament,” which is something Jordanians continue to fight against (37).

The most meaningful takeaway from this movement is the knowledge that authoritarian regimes in the Arab World bend to the will of the people when pressed hard enough. In some cases, it has proven just how easily the façade of oppressive power crumbles when faced with solidarity amongst a populous. Regardless of the outcome, this development marked progress in the regional shift of power into the hands of the people.

Despite the extraordinary hope brought to many people of the Middle East and North Africa by this movement, one uprising stirred violence that is still ongoing. The regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has brutally suppressed the voices and actions of Syrian citizens since the movement spilled over into the streets of Syria. On February 17, 2011, Syrians protested in Damascus for the first time in decades in response to a police officer assaulting a civilian (Fares 148). Obaida Fares, director of the United Kingdom based Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship, explains that as the protestors chanted “the Syrian people will not be humiliated,” a slogan that was later adopted by the Syrian rebellion, the government grew wary
to the point that Interior Minister Saeed Samour was sent to address the crowds (148). This attempted show of authority was not enough to silence the Syrian people. Human Rights Watch reports that the “detention and torture of 15 young boys accused of painting graffiti slogans calling for the downfall of the regime” on February 26, 2011 was the initial spark, igniting a conflict that still plagues Syria to this day (“Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces”).

Arab Spring Sparks a Violent War in Syria

The circumstances by which people are forcibly displaced, commonly termed push factors, are rooted primarily in war and violence. Furthermore, political strife, economic upheaval, and environmental factors often compliment the path to violence (Boswell 3). Faced with a crackdown by the Assad regime on all forms of dissent, the Syrian people have defended themselves, coming together in a rebellious fight for liberation and freedom. Since 2011, the country has been engaged in a full-fledged civil war that has killed an estimated 511,000 people (Specia), displaced 6.2 million people internally, and has pushed an additional 6.3 million to become refugees according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) (“Forced From Home”). The effects have been felt all over the world. In neighboring countries such as Lebanon, where 944,000 displaced Syrians currently reside, the Lebanese have taken in refugees eclipsing 15% of their current six-million-person population. Jordan has taken in 660,000 displaced Syrians and Turkey is currently at a staggering 3.6 million (“Refugee Situations”). The extraordinary showings of generosity and solidarity do not end at the borders.

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2 To learn more about the underlying causes of war and violence that so often precede forced displacement, and the ways in which outside actors can preemptively address these causes, see Boswell 1-27.
of Syria’s neighboring states. The European Union had settled over one million Syrian refugees by the end of 2017, with a majority ending their search for asylum in Germany (530,000), Sweden (110,000), and Austria (50,000) according to the Pew Research Center (Connor).

The devastating oppression being perpetrated by the Assad regime targets well known push factors quite comprehensively, creating an incredibly vulnerable population. Limiting access to healthcare and creating food insecurity directly affects the well-being of Syrian people. It is estimated that 814 medical professionals have been killed between 2011 and 2017 in a multitude of attacks on aid envoys and health clinics attempting to inhibit access to medical care (Fouad, Fouad M, et al. 2518). It is estimated that more than 90% of these attacks were perpetrated by the Assad regime and their main ally, Russia (Fouad, Fouad M, et al. 2518-2519).

Economic instability impacts the ability of Syrian people to provide for themselves and their families. As the decimation of Syrian industry and the workforce grew between 2011 and 2016, it is estimate that “the cumulative losses in gross domestic product (GDP) have been estimated at $226 billion, about four times the Syrian GDP in 2010.” (Onder et al. 14). War and violence are an immediate threat to the lives of Syrian people. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism Fact-finding Mission confirmed the use of chemical weapons in at least 85 incidents dating back to August 21, 2013, most often using sarin and chlorine gas (“Syria: A Year On”). These attacks have resulted in “over 13,000 injuries and 3,415 deaths” (Brooks et al. 2).
Many Syrians living in these conditions are desperate enough to set out on a trek away from the country in which they are forced to live in constant fear for their lives. Despite the neighborly measures taken by Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, these countries are limited in the resources they can provide to such a large group of people. The Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan or the makeshift and informal Bekaa Valley camps in Lebanon are intended to help refugees survive the conflict, not thrive despite it. The UNHCR estimates that 93% of Syrian refugees residing in Jordan live below the poverty line (“Refugee Situations”). With few options, many brave Syrians have made the decision to forego these camps in favor of a different continent altogether. Europe stands as a beacon of wealth and opportunity within geographical range of their seemingly forsaken home country.

A European Immigration Crisis: the German Solution

According to a Pew Research Center, 1.3 million people sought asylum in Europe at the height of the immigration crisis in 2015, 29% of whom came from Syria (Connor 4). 442,000 applications were filed in Germany alone, with 36% filed by Syrian refugees (Connor 21). These are the highest numbers seen since the EU asylum rules were established in the Schengen Agreement of 1985.3 The second biggest year was 1992, when 697,000 refugees applied for asylum in the EU (Connor 6) This influx of refugees followed the fall of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of communist rule from the Eastern Europe, which destabilized the area formerly known as Yugoslavia and resulted in an ethnic cleansing event now known as the Bosnian War (Lampe). In August of 2015, when the number of asylum applications in Europe reached truly

3 According to Griese, the Schengen Agreement is a treaty between EU member states that opened their internal borders, paving the way for the visa free travel enjoyed by those within the EU today (Griese 4).
unprecedented levels, German Chancellor Angela Merkel suspended the EU’s Dublin Regulation when dealing with Syrian refugees. The Dublin Regulation requires asylum claims to be processed by the country in which the refugee first arrives, so this move eliminated the responsibility of the German State to investigate whether a refugee must be sent back to another EU member state (Griese 29). This shift in policy allowed for much-needed relief in countries such as Greece and Italy, where many of these asylum seekers were arriving from the land route through Turkey or the sea route across the Mediterranean Sea [(Griese 13, see Figure 1)].

![Figure 1](https://erccportal.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ercmaps/2)

**Figure 1. Migrantion routes from: “Refugee Crisis | Arrivals to Europe - Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) | DG ECHO Daily Map | 20/04/2018.” ERCC Portal, Emergency Response Coordination Center, 20 Apr. 2018, erccportal.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ercmaps/2**

In the time since Germany’s monumental shift in immigration policy, I argue that the relationship between the German and Syrian populations living in Germany has deteriorated
significantly. The changing sentiment amongst the German populous toward refugees proves that this welcoming atmosphere has deteriorated into one of ostracization. This change in sentiment is illustrated in the artwork created by Syrians Manaf Halbouni and Rasha Deeb, in the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) political party, and in hate-based crime perpetrated against refugees and Islamic people. Beginning with an examination into the motivation behind the culture of support surrounding Merkel’s 2015 decision to suspend the Dublin Regulation, I will establish a baseline lens through which we can view the German sentiment towards Syrian refugees changing.

The Influence of Germany’s Recent History

The reason Merkel and her government took this unprecedented stance toward immigration has been widely speculated. Germany has worked long and hard to shed the nationalist reputation rooted in fascism that was built up prior to, and during World War II. Because of this, German citizens wary of their image in the eyes of the international community. The notion of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, describing the processes “of coming to terms with the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust,” and “dealing with the East German communist dictatorship,” still holds prominence in German civil society (“Vergangenheitsbewältigung”). Among other influences, the value of outwardly portraying yourself and your country as open and welcoming likely weighed heavy on Merkel’s mind when making this decision.

Furthermore, a portion of German citizens know firsthand the perils of war and how devastating it can be to families and communities. The fallout of the Second World War saw 40
million people forcibly displaced, and there is a collective memory of the terrible events that took place. Upwards of 7.9 million Germans were repatriated from the Eastern provinces of the German Reich to the territories occupied by the Western allies when the Potsdam Treaty of 1945 was signed (Braun et al. 1001). This treaty stipulated that Germany relinquish administrative control of areas they occupied during the war, such as East Prussia, Silesia, most of Pomerania, and the Sudetenland (Braun et al. 1001). The treaty explicitly stated that all Germans be expelled from annexed territories across Eastern Europe (Braun et al. 1002). It is explained that “despite heavy war losses, the West German population increased dramatically from 39.4 million in 1939 to 47.7 million in 1950” (Braun et al. 1001).

Germans have also experienced how the benevolence of a foreign government can help rebuild lives. The post-World War II Marshall Plan was an aid package from the United States valued at $13 billion dollars, designed to help Western Europe “restore industrial and agricultural production, establish financial stability, and expand trade” (“Marshall Plan”). This fiscal reconstruction package launched an economic resurgence in West Germany and laid the foundation for it to become the strongest economy in Europe (“GDP and main components”).

However, in recent years a labor shortage has beset the manufacturing and export-oriented industries of Europe’s powerhouse economy, due primarily to their ever-aging pool of laborers (Nienaber). According to the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry February 2019 Economic Survey, 81% of the 27,000 companies surveyed say “the shortage of skilled workers continues to be the greatest risk to business development” (Nothnagel et al 30). Regarding future business expectations, their outlook is growing “gloomier,” despite reported “good business” in the retail and construction industries Nothnagel et al 10). This casts a dark
cloud over Germany’s economic future, which relies heavily on strong manufacturing output. Nevertheless, it is well within the realm of possibility that Syrian refugees can be taught relevant skills within Germany’s renowned vocational school system and become suitable candidates for these job opportunities as Lily Hildy suggests in her report for The Century Foundation (Hildy). This would eventually help to offset the effects of a shrinking labor market, contribute significantly to the integration of Syrians into German society, give them valuable knowledge about German culture, and teach them skills that would facilitate their prosperity back in their home country (Hildy).

Additionally, the persecution and fear of violence Syrian people are facing resonates with Germans, allowing them to identify closely with the situation faced by Syrians. There was a common sense of empathy and compassion towards the victims of Syria’s Civil War that was strong enough to upend European Union asylum regulations. The complex sentiments that developed out of the rubble of World War II, particularly a sense of guilt, continue to heavily influence German civil society. Given the chance, Germans were ready to prove that they had learned from the transgressions of past generations and show the world how powerful solidarity can be in the face of evil. A combination of guilt, solidarity, and economic necessity proved powerful, leading most Germans to initially tolerate the influx of Syrian refugees.

**Germany’s Change in Sentiment Toward Outsiders**

There are reliable empirical sets of data that can be referenced to prove that a significant shift in sentiment is underway. From the rise of xenophobic and anti-immigration focused political parties to crime being done unto this majority Islamic group of people, the
evidence abounds. A response to such developments by Syrians living in Germany can be found in art work that comments on the current climate of German-Syrian relations. Artists rely heavily on their own experiences when creating their work, so looking at what they create can be telling of the situations they have been in, both mentally and physically. The legendary filmmaker Federico Fellini once said, “all art is autobiographical; the pearl is the oyster's autobiography” in reference to the effect that an environment has on an artist’s work (Walters 62). Art allows an artist to construct a narrative, which serves as a guide through one’s experience, evoking emotions and highlighting topics in a story that it is being told to the viewer. Art is also versatile in its wide array of mediums and meaningful interpretive themes. A person can pick up a can of spray paint and paint the words “Refugees Welcome” onto the side of any building, as I saw so many times while studying at the Friedrich–Alexander University Erlangen–Nürnberg in 2017. This is a statement just as much as it is expressive, simplistic art. Conversely, another person can also pick up a can of spray paint and turn that statement into “Refugees NOT Welcome,” which I also saw many times.

Art is a tool that transcends the cultural barriers plaguing public discourse in the topic of refugee integration today, which is why this perspective is so important in the analyze of the current social climate in Germany. An analysis of sculpture and painting by two Syrians living in Germany shows how artists are bringing the topic of German-Syrian relations to the forefront of public discourse today. Focusing on both refugee and non-refugee Syrian artists living in Germany widens the vantage point and allows one to view how the topic is framed by those immediately effected by the Syrian Civil War and by those who had immigrated to Germany for other reasons.
Syrian Artwork in Germany

One of the most symbolic art installations is titled “Monuments” by Manaf Halbouni (2017). Halbouni is a Syrian national who came to Germany in 2009 to continue his Arts studies and circumvent two years of compulsory military service at the command of the Assad regime (Halbouni). Since arriving in Germany, Halbouni has studied Visual Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden and made quite the imprint on the German art community. His breathtaking installation featured three upended buses rising 40 feet high into the sky. It was first exhibited in front of the Church of our Lady / Frauenkirche in Dresden, and then in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin (Quinn). These settings are shown below in Figure 3 and Figure 4. Halbouni’s exhibit draws inspiration from a very specific picture taken by a young Syrian photographer, Karam Al-Masri, depicting a blockade constructed by Syrian rebels in the city of Aleppo (Figure 2). The blockade was constructed to block the view of the regime snipers. In the time since, this has become a common military strategy implemented by both sides as a way of protecting themselves against opposition fire (Laurent).

4 You can learn more about Manaf Halbouni’s work at his personal website: www.manaf-halbouni.com.
Halbouni said the installation was meant to link the war time experiences of those in Syria to those in Europe, which is why the symbolism associated with its location in both time and place are paramount to understanding the message he is attempting to communicate with.
the viewer (Quinn). Halbouni further elaborated on this point in a personal interview, in which he conveyed his goal as drawing on past sentiments of German displacement to frame the present situation of Syrian displacement in a relatable way so that constructive talks about the future can be had between the two groups of people (Halbouni). Halbouni is approaching the politically charged issue of refugee-host country relations very logically as he understands the issues arising in the German-Syrian relationship are fundamentally issues of difference: different language, skin color, food, music, and so on. However, he sees a connection in the shared pain and hardship of excessive war and violence that is powerful enough to overcome these inconsequential surface differences. Seeing this connection inspired Halbouni to integrate important German landmarks into Monuments.

The Church of our Lady was destroyed during a British and US led bombing raid on the city of Dresden, in February of 1945, near the end of World War II. During this bombing, it is estimated that 25,000 to 30,000 people were killed, many of whom were refugees fleeing the advance of the Russia’s Red Army from the East. The ruins of the church went largely untouched, lying as a symbol of Nazi downfall until its reconstruction began in 1994 (James 246). While the bombing and destruction of Dresden is widely viewed as an act of unnecessary cruelty against Germany’s civilian population, its rebuilding after the reunification of East Germany and West Germany symbolizes a stage of reconciliation and “a new beginning on peace and freedom” (James 246). At the Church of our Lady, Halbouni exhibited his installation during the 72nd commemoration of the destruction of the city during the Second World War in February of 1945 (Chambers). Not only does this presentation link the shared pain of Germans and Syrians, it also signals the potential for a reconciled relationship.
The Brandenburg Gate stood similarly as a symbol of reconciliation, but not until after the fall of the Berlin Wall. From 1961 until 1989, the Gate stood on the border of the East German and the West German sectors of Berlin, severing access by citizens of both states until the first pieces of the Wall were dismantled. On December 22, 1989, the Gate reopened. It was on this day that West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl strode through the Gate to meet East German Prime Minister Hans Modrow, solidifying the landmark in the hearts and minds of Germans as a unifying force (“Brandenburg Gate”). At the Brandenburg Gate, Halbouni’s installation was exhibited on the 28th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989, signifying the potential for a reconciled relationship between Germans and Syrian refugees (Alkousaa).

These two German monuments are places of crucial historic importance, both conveying strong themes of reconciliation. They stand as two testaments to the will of the people to harmonize; to put aside differences and move forward with life in peace with one another. By integrating these monuments into his exhibit, the viewer is shown a powerful attempt by a Syrian to display his connection to Germans on a large scale. It is a visceral experience to see these towering buses and feel the interrelatedness that Halbouni has laid out so plainly. Halbouni suggests that the connection that has brought these two groups of people together is deeper than a common geographical living arrangement. By exposing this connection, Halbouni shows the viewer that the reconciliation of German-Syrian relations is still possible.

The reactions to his work were predictably mixed. Reuters reported that a German tourist, Dieter Krapp, stated “it’s a little bizarre, but ... that’s art” in reference to the installation in Dresden (Alkousaa). A statement put out by the local branch of the AfD, a party known for
their rhetoric and policy proposals critical of foreigners, called the work an “abuse of artistic freedom” that was placed specifically to quell the activities of far-right groups who commonly use the square before the Church of our Lady as a “rallying point” for their local marches and protests (Oltermann). The AfD also called Halbouni’s installation “an insult to the citizens of Dresden” (Chambers). When Dresden Mayor Dirk Hilbert spoke positively at the unveiling of the installation, his speech was overshadowed by an overwhelming unrest in the crowd where onlookers booed him and screamed at him to go away. Mayor Hilbert was called “garbage” and a “traitor” by protesters in the crowd (Chambers). In the time since, Hilbert is also reported to have received death threats (Chambers).

Equally important is the work of Syrian refugee Rasha Deeb. Deeb is an artist who made the grueling trek from Syria to Germany by way of the Mediterranean as a direct result of the conflict plaguing her home country. A 15-day boat ride carried her to the European continent before making her way into Germany in 2016. By 2017, she was living in Munich, learning a new language, and acclimating to a new culture, all while striving to carve out a successful artistic life in a place much different than she is used to (Sawant). In Nimish Sawant’s “Refugee Stories” series, Deeb was given a platform to show her work and tell her story. Although she admires the work of Pablo Picasso, her inspiration lies not in the work of other great artists, but in the experiences from her own life. Deeb believes “every artist in Syria has his or her own story to tell” (Sawant). According to Sawant, Deeb specialized in sculpture and collage mediums while studying Fine Arts in Damascus, Syria, but the large workspace and copious materials needed for this type of work are not easy to manage given her current living situation (Sawant). In the time since arriving in Germany, she has adapted a new artistic outlet: painting.
Of the various pieces featured in the article and Deeb’s social media page, one of her paintings stuck out as particularly powerful. This oil painting (Figure 5) depicts the contorted neck and revealing face of a man peering out at the viewer with wide, questioning eyes. His circular shaped face and puckered lips peer out in an inquisitive way, as if to question the viewer’s reason for standing before him. His expression, bristling with a mixture of curiousness and conceit, seems to poke fun at the viewers own appearance: different and without the plumpness that defines his own body. His appearance is indicative of health, wealth, and a general wellbeing that lends to the viewer’s feeling of being small in the presence of such a self-assured individual. This feeling is only exacerbated when the viewer lays eyes on the hawkish bird perched on his shoulder, protecting him from any and all harm. The bird unfurls its wings, as if to flaunt its strength and warn its perch of the potential danger lurking ahead of them. The viewer is left feeling helpless and out of place in the presence of such a powerful, albeit hairless, figure.

While the name of Deeb’s piece is not discussed, its meaning is. She stated that the work was her “interpretation of the German culture of Ordnung, where people get worked up about the smallest of things” (Sawant). This culture of Ordnung (orderliness) is one that places high value on societal systems and structures. In his book “When Cultures Collide,” cross-
cultural communications expert Richard D. Lewis explains that “Germans, just as they believe in simple, scientific truth, believe that true Ordnung is achievable, provided that sufficient rules, regulations and procedures are firmly in place” (70). Within this culture, it is instilled in individuals and valued by the population that one understands and executes their responsibilities completely, efficiently, and with punctuality (Lewis 212). This theme stands out as Syrian refugees are, in this case, perceived to be the source of disorder in an otherwise orderly, structured German society organized to maximize efficiency. Within the universe of Deeb’s painting, Syrian refugees function as the object Germans are peering at, as if to ask, “What are you doing here? Do you belong?” Deeb’s work highlights the growing difficulties faced by Syrian refugees as they transplant into a completely new culture where they may be unaware of cultural norms and unable to meet the expectations German society has of them.

By calling attention to the struggles associated with the integration process, Deeb shows the viewer the that there is no escaping the prying eyes and inevitable questions about whether one belongs in German society. While many Syrian refugees are forced to completely abandon their lives, their culture, and sometimes even their family members when they are forcibly displaced from their homeland, consideration and acknowledgement of the push factors has waned since 2015. They leave with what they can carry and may be forced to use their belongings as currency to pay their way to safety as was so plainly demonstrated in the “Forced From Home” exhibit.\(^5\) It must be kept in mind that often, refugees have had much of their identity erased by the time they arrive in Germany. Losses such as these chip away pieces

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\(^5\) The “Forced From Home” interactive exhibit is an event organized by Doctors Without Borders to raise awareness for worldwide displacement. In my simulated trek to Europe, I took water, medicine, pets, clothing, and money. These items were all quickly exchanged for services, such as boat transport across the Mediterranean.
of the identity that makes one an individual. Deeb’s piece is a plea for simple understanding and patience from the German society providing them safe harbor. It implores Germans to take into consideration both the situation that forced Syrian refugees to Germany and the sheer magnitude of the integration being expected of them before an instantaneous categorization of ‘does not fit in – does not belong’ is made. The relationship between refugee and host country need not be viewed as an equal balance of give and take where, for example, the welfare given to refugees must be given back equally in terms of economic contributions. Rather, it is a fluid exchange of compassion that relies on the good intentions of both parties to flourish.

While this is a very small sample of the art created by Syrians living in Germany, the themes represented herein are important to the process of Germans and Syrians understanding one another and finding common ground on which they can live together peacefully. The art created by Rasha Deeb and Manaf Halbouni highlights the growing feelings of inflexibility Syrian refugees are facing in German society, in which not even the most diligent attempts made by refugees to integrate are met with acceptance. I presume this is because they are seen as inherently different. The stories these artists are constructing in their art allows us to discern how they feel about these issues and peer into an unfiltered expression of their experience in Germany. Their works evoke the feeling of an outsider looking in, with answers in hand, but no one to listen. Hope, however, remains as their art continues to draw attention to this issue.
The AfD Finds Success on the Fringes

To show in quantitative terms how the initially positive reception of refugees by Germans has morphed into a much more ostracizing sentiment, we need not look further than the German Parliament. The meteoric rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) political party, which is currently the third most popular party in Parliament with 91 seats, exemplifies just how fast these sentiments are growing (“Parliamentary Groups”). The origins of the AfD began with a group of dissatisfied former Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party members, namely Konrad Adam, Alexander Gauland, and Bernd Lucke (Alzheimer 541). After forming an unsuccessful political action group, Wahlalternative, these individuals went on to establish the AfD political party in April 2013, just months before the German federal elections (Alzheimer 541). In their first manifesto, drawing ideas from their policy positions set forth under Wahlalternative, the party proved to be Eurosceptic in nature. Their agenda hinged largely on fiscal and monetary policy centering on criticism of the Eurozone and European integration (Arzheimer 541). This policy effectually allowed the AfD to criticize the role that the EU plays on deciding domestic German policy as well as perpetuate an “us-versus-them” mentality that served to galvanize voters who felt left out of the democratic decision-making process, both at home and within the context of the EU.

In the German federal election of 2013, the AfD received 4.7% of the popular vote and gained no seats. They fell short of the 5% threshold required for parliamentary representation. This legal threshold has functioned as the primary hurdle for far-right parties to overcome since its introduction after World War II (Harrison 37). Another hallmark of Germany’s successful multi-party proportional representation system is the need for coalition building to obtain a
ruling majority. This traditionally allows for representation of various voices in parliament, and even in a cabinet, but has now become more difficult to obtain as the established parties do their best to avoid coalitions with the AfD. Chancellor Merkel has ruled out a coalition altogether, confirming the reality of the threat this party poses to Germany’s progressive policy reputation (Arzheimer 552). On the surface, this electoral failure may look devastating, however, for the AfD, at less than one year old, it was a truly remarkable success. The AfD’s leadership was quick to begin development of a more composite policy agenda that would appeal to a wider audience (Arzheimer 541).

The AfD’s manifesto prepared for the 2017 election grew into something much more indicative of a competitive German political party in terms of multi-dimensional policy, but is largely reduced to an ostracization of outsiders not fit for their vision of Germany. The manifesto directly addresses Islam in many instances, which the AfD insists is a “danger to our state, our society, and our values” that has no place in Germany (“Manifesto for Germany” 48). AfD opposes the financing of Mosques by Islamic states, public body status being granted to Islamic organizations, the wearing of burkas and niquabs in public spaces, and the wearing of any sort of headscarf by public servants, teachers, and students (“Manifesto for Germany” 48-49). The AfD touts their commitment to keeping Germany of and for the Germans because their culture, summarized as traditions based on Christianity, scientific and humanistic heritage, and Roman law, is the foundation of Germany’s “free and democratic society” (“Manifesto for Germany” 46).

In response to the immigration policy championed by Merkel’s government, the AfD strengthened their hardline position on immigration, integration, and asylum (“Manifesto for Germany” 49).
Germany” 57). The AfD denounced the “breach of the Dublin Agreement by southern EU countries” and demanded the “complete closure of external EU borders” while also calling for “strict German border control measures” that include “protective fences or similar barriers” wherever irregular immigration happens (“Manifesto for Germany” 59). The AfD insists “that the Law on Repatriation is enhanced, simplified and consistently applied” at a time when Syrian nationals are dying on a daily basis in their homeland (“Manifesto for Germany” 59). Vague criticisms of the “ideologically-biased climate of political correctness, accompanied by banned terms and newspeak,” presumably for stigmatizing their membership, are made throughout (“Manifesto for Germany” 57). The AfD claims that “such treatment of non-conformist opinions has been a characteristic of totalitarian countries, but not of free democratic societies” (“Manifesto for Germany” 57). The party’s denunciation of any criticism of their racist rhetoric as political correctness “characteristic of totalitarian countries” is a shameful way to deflect accusations of blatant racism that is clearly represented in their campaign literature, shown in Figures 6 and 7 below (“Manifesto for Germany” 57).
The threat posed by the AfD, and what sets them apart from the traditional mainstream ideologically right-wing parties, is demonstrated by its core ideological belief in nativism. This belief lays the foundation for their problematic policy platform. According to Cas Mudde’s internationally acclaimed categorization of right-wing political parties, the lowest common denominator in the ideological belief system of a far-right party family is nativism (Mudde 19). Mudde defines the nativist ideology as “a combination of nationalism and xenophobia which “holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde 19). With the prevalence of nativist ideologies in many far-right groups, Mudde adds that his maximum definition, categorized as ‘populist radical right,’ also includes ideological populism and authoritarianism as defining characteristics (Mudde 22). While there is certainly evidence to support the argument that the AfD is a populist radical right-wing political party, the focus here is on how their nativist ideology has grown so rapidly since the height of the migrant crisis in 2015.

The policies and positions set forth by the AfD drip with nativism. Their superiority complex shines blindingly bright in their literature, and their will to demonize Islamic people in general is disturbingly reminiscent of Nazi-era anti-Semitic rhetoric. Their policies outline a plan to raise a multitude of barriers to any refugee fleeing violence and seeking refuge in Germany. In addition, their demand for a strict repatriation policy completely fails to account for the dire

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6 Following Mudde, Kai Arzheimer describes populism as an ideological pitting of “the ‘pure people’ against a corrupt elite and puts majority rule above human rights and constitutional checks and balances” (Arzheimer 537).

7 Kai Arzheimer’s definition of authoritarianism includes “an aggressive stance towards political enemies and a preference for a strictly ordered society, strong leadership, and severe punishments for offenders” (Arzheimer 537).
situation Syrians would currently face if deported back to their home country. This monolithic immigration policy insists on Germany being put first, regardless of how many people are dying elsewhere. Germans are becoming increasingly supportive of the translation of this policy platform into actual law directed at those deemed outsiders in German society.

At the polls, this has rewarded the AfD handsomely. The AfD garnered 12.6% of the popular vote in the 2017 federal election, an incredible 7.9% increase over their 2013 federal election result (Klikauer 612). In this election, far-right-wing politics were vaulted from near obscurity into serious electoral contention, trailing only the most established of German political parties. At the top, the center-right Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU coalition) received 32.9% and the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) received 20.5% (Klikauer 612). As the popularity of the AfD has risen, their rhetoric has grown more inflammatory. If the AfD continues to be rewarded with more votes, this trajectory will only serve to further divide German society on the basis of religion, ethnicity, and nationality.

**German Voting Patterns Reveal a Unique Shift**

A more pronounced and impactful shift in German sentiment towards refugees can be seen when we examine German voting patterns between the 2013 and 2017 federal elections and compare them to the patterns predicted by the Downsian median-voter theorem. The theorem hypothesizes that inclusion into the electoral process has a moderating effect on the policies of a candidate or a party (Figure 8). It argues that in order to win a majority of votes, which are distributed along the bell-shaped curve associated with this projection, a party will be moderated over time in order to gain more of the voters in the middle, where they are most
abundant (De Lange et al. 3). With this assumption in mind, we can predict that the AfD would be likely to lose votes given the radicalized policy trajectory we just examined. However, quite the opposite is happening: beginning in 2017, the establishment parties inhabiting the center of the German political spectrum, the CDU/CSU (center-right coalition) and the SDP (center-left), lost 8.5% and 5.2% of the popular vote (“2017 German Election Results”). In combination with the strong electoral showing of the AfD, who received an increase of 7.9%, this proves that a significant change in the way the general population of Germans citizens view immigrants is underway, highlighting the similar change in sentiments towards refugees and asylum seekers from Syria (“2017 German Election Results”)

![Median Voter Distribution Graph](Figure_6_.png)

**A Link Between Social Media and Real-world Events**

The hate and demonization perpetrated by the AfD has not gone on without consequence. To some of those who are being targeted by the AfD, I argue that there is a direct link from the crime done unto them to the inflammatory language used by the AfD. In a study by Karsten Müller and Carlo Schwarz of the University of Warwick, anti-refugee Facebook
posts by the AfD were analyzed as potential cause to anti-refugee incidents in Germany (Müller and Schwarz 2). The prevalence of racism and xenophobia allowed on Facebook has not gone unnoticed in Germany. Acknowledging the threat this sort of hate poses, German Federal Minister of Justice and Consumer Protection Heiko Maas sent a letter to Facebook in 2015 calling on the company to enforce their community standards better and more monolithically (Goebel). In the letter, Maas called their community standards a “farce,” citing the confusion of users who “were struggling to understand why Facebook is quick to ban nudity, for example, referring to its community standards, but often fails to ban xenophobic and racist posts” (Goebel). While Müller and Schwarz acknowledge the lack of empirical evidence linking “social media to real-life outcomes,” their cutting-edge research has established a clear link in the case of Germany (Müller and Schwarz 1).

On Facebook, the AfD is the most popular political party in Germany with more than 300,000 page likes (Müller and Schwarz 2). In terms of interactions with the German public, the reach of the AfD is unparalleled. Their page hosts “over 176,000 posts, more than 290,000 comments, and 500,000 likes by over 93,000 individual users” (Müller and Schwarz 2). The breadth of data hosted on their page provides remarkable insight into the social media tactics used by far-right political parties. To examine the link between AfD Facebook posts and real-world outcomes, Müller and Schwarz analyzed four primary sets of data. They collected data on anti-refugee incidents across Germany through the Amadeu Antonio Foundation and Pro Asyl, who record the reporting of anti-refugee incidents ranging from anti-refugee graffiti to outright hate crimes (Müller and Schwarz 8). They used the Facebook Graph API to collect all posts by the AfD and the public information associated the users who interacted with the AfD
posts (Müller and Schwarz 10). Of the more than 93,000 users who interacted with AfD posts, the researchers were able to hand-collect public location data of 39,632 users (Müller and Schwarz 11). They collected data on internet and Facebook disruptions from Heise Online, which “lists user reports of internet problems by dialing code areas, as well as their start time and the duration” (Müller and Schwarz 12). They also include various controls into their dataset to ward against variability.⁸

Müller and Schwarz first compiled all posts on the AfD page including the word Flüchtling (refugee) as those are the posts they deemed most likely to incite anti-refugee crime. Then, by analyzing the location data of users who interacted with an AfD post and the time in which their interaction took place, they were able to link interactions on a post with the time and place of certain anti-refugee incidents. By linking these pieces of information, Müller and Schwarz were able to establish a cause an effect relationship between anti-refugee AfD posts and anti-refugee incidents in the real-world. To prove causality, they also analyzed AfD posts with the words “Muslim,” “Islam,” “Jude” (Jew), and “EU,” and found no indication that this sort of reaction was directed at minority groups in general (Müller and Schwarz 31). Also, when analyzing this information during times of internet or Facebook outages, they saw that the link between anti-refugee AfD posts and anti-refugee incidents in an area affected by the outage was entirely mitigated (Müller and Schwarz 28).

The results of this study have suggested that “social media can act as a propagation mechanism between online hate speech and real-life incidents” (Müller and Schwarz 1). They

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⁸ The specific controls they include are detailed on pages 13-15 (Müller and Schwarz).
suggest that when widespread anti-refugee sentiment arises in Germany, and is stoked by social media pages like the AfD’s, an interaction with one of these posts “may push some potential perpetrators over the edge to carry out violent acts” that they may not have ordinarily been inclined to commit (Müller and Schwarz 2). The work done by Müller and Schwarz suggests that AfD Facebook posts are responsible for 446 (13%) anti-refugee incidents occurring from January 2015 to early 2017 (Müller and Schwarz 41). Figure 9 graphs this correlation. Given the rising popularity of the AfD and their growing reach to Germans all over the state, their activities on Facebook appear to be remarkably reckless and increasingly dangerous.

The Prevalence of Anti-Islamic Hate Crime

Anti-refugee crime is not the only noteworthy measure of crime against refugees. I believe that anti-Islamic hate crime must also be included in this analysis as over 85% of Syrians share some form of this faith (Scullard et al.). This particularly heinous crime is
motivated by hate of the religion, culture, or identity of Islamic people. The *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung* reported that in 2017, the first year this type of data had been collected by Germany’s Federal Ministry of the Interior, there were a total of 950 anti-Islamic crimes committed, ranging from vandalism to physical assault, which caused injury to 33 people (Saeed). In 2018, the overall number of anti-Islamic crime decreased to 813, but the number of those injured by such crimes rose significantly to 52 (“Germany Sees Fewer Attacks”). When the 2018 data was published in April 2019, the German government also noted that “because of slow or delayed reports, the final numbers could be even higher” (“Germany Sees Fewer Attacks”). German authorities estimate that almost all the attacks were committed by “far-right extremists” (“Germany Sees Fewer Attacks”).

Although this statistic does not “reflect the true scope of anti-Muslim sentiment,” according to Germany’s Central Council of Muslims, it provides us with important critical lens through which we can further dissect the German-Syrian relationship. The problem with measuring this statistic, according to Aiman Mazyek, the chair of the Central Council of Muslims, is rooted in the fact that “there is a big blind spot, because the authorities — police and prosecutors — are not yet sensitized, and therefore many cases do not appear in the statistics” (Saeed). In addition, Mazyek cites a ‘psychological barrier’ that results in apprehension of the victims reporting crimes in the first place, a trend he has seen grow worse in recent years. This barrier is a direct result of the insensitivity of authorities enforcing Germany’s laws. When these crime statistics are viewed in relation to Germany’s overall crime rate, which is sitting at a 26-year low, it indicates a profound change in German sentiment towards refugees (King). In response to the release of the 2018 data, Mazyek has called for the
establishment of a government post to monitor crimes against Muslims, stating “such a representative is more necessary than ever, because there is a latent anti-Muslim mood in Germany” (“Germany Sees Fewer Attacks”).

**Refugee Crime**

I would be remiss to pass over data on refugee violence in Germany. This has become a primary weapon of anti-immigration figures in German society, which gives me enough reason to address it wholeheartedly. It will also provide more of a comprehensive image of the German-Syrian relationship. In a study commissioned by Germany's Ministry of Family Affairs, researchers at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences found that violent crime in the German state of Lower Saxony had increased 10.4% from the beginning of 2014 to the end of 2016, with 91.2% being attributed to refugees (Bershidsky). While these numbers certainly do look ominous, digging into the data further reveals interesting patterns. First, when looking at the victims of these crimes, the data shows that 91% of murders and 75% of crimes causing great bodily harm are perpetrated against other refugees (Bershidsky). On the other hand, 70% of robberies and 58.6% of sexual assault crimes are perpetrated against Germans (Bershidsky). The conclusions drawn by Bershidsky help explain the unique distribution of crime when looked at from the perspective of the victim rather than the offender.

Second, the share of those committing these violent crimes relative to their population in Germany is disproportionately weighted towards those of North African nationalities.

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9 The full study was published in German, so I am relying on Leonid Bershidsky’s reporting of it. The full report was written by Christian Pfeiffer, Dirk Baier, and Sören Kliem (Pfeiffer et al. 5-91)

10 Please see paragraphs 7-13 (Bershidsky).
Refugees from the North African states Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, while representing just 0.9% of the refugee population in Lower Saxony, account for more than 17% of the violent crime during the analyzed period (Bershidsky). During that same period, refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, who representing 54.7% of the refugee population, account for 34.9% of violent crime (Bershidsky). This data does not provide an excuse for Syrian refugees or place blame on North African refugees, it is simply compiled data that allows us to further analyze a relationship and discuss ways in which the trend of increasing violent crime can be reversed.

While this data does not necessarily help the case being made for refugee tolerance and integration, it certainly does make the case for heightened cultural awareness and understanding from both Germans and refugees. I believe that with a better understanding of the situations faced by each group, as well as the cultural norms of religion, rule of law, social interaction, etc. associated with each group, we can begin actively working to reverse this trend.

**Conclusion**

The situation faced by Syrians directly and indirectly affected by the Syrian Civil War is one of extreme uncertainty. With the number of displaced persons continuously climbing, world leaders and neighboring states alike are shying away from the responsibility they have to provide protections to these refugees. When the crisis reached its peak in 2015, it appeared as if a movement of solidarity would overcome the evils decimating Syria. Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel led that charge by granting the possibility of asylum in Germany to those affected by the Civil War. With support among her citizens, Germany looked poised to set a
Western World standard in addressing humanitarian crises such as this. However, it has become apparent that the sentiment of Germans toward refugees is changing dramatically.

Highlighting this change is artwork created by Syrians living in Germany, the rise of the AfD political party, and crime done unto refugees and Islamic people. The art made by Manaf Halbouni exhibits the deep connection between Germans and Syrian refugees that can form the foundation of a flourishing relationship. When looking at Rasha Deeb’s art, viewers are shown the difficulty of an outsider fitting in within German society. Together, their work fights to bring the deterioration of the German-Syrian relationship and the difficulties of integration to the forefront of German public discourse. However, the difficulty they face is often exacerbated by the inflammatory rhetoric of political parties such as the AfD, who is successfully working to sow hatred and violence of refugees and Islamic people within German society. The AfD’s rhetoric can be directly linked to anti-refugee incidents in Germany and their despicable language towards Islam reminds us one of Nazi-era anti-Semitic rhetoric. Just as we cannot ignore the crime against refugees, we cannot pass over the violent acts committed by refugees. We must learn from these transgressions that cultural understanding and compassion for one another will be more effective than hate and exclusion.

After facing calls from within her own governing coalition to curb the flow of refugees into Germany, Merkel signed legislation in early 2018 that reverts to deportation of asylum seekers whose asylum is the responsibility of another EU member state (McAuley and Beck). Despite the valid claims to asylum brought by Syrian refugees to Germany, the asylum system designed to protect them is being undermined by a growing minority of xenophobic actors in Germany. The growing popularity of anti-refugee policy only serves to discourage Syrians from
leaving the dangerous situation in their homeland and sets an example for the way in which Germany will deal with other humanitarian crises. Germany must acknowledge the responsibility owed to refugees as is outlined in Articles 20-24 of the United Nations 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, of which Germany is a signee ("1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees"). At a time when worldwide displacement is at an all-time high, 50% higher than the 42.7 million displaced in 2007, we must look critically at the ways in which we deal with humanitarian crises such as the Syrian Civil War ("Global Trends" 2). I believe that the strong influences Germans are grappling with, a progressive predisposition borne out of Germany’s history with oppressive government in combination with increasingly inflammatory rhetoric from the ideological far-right, will continue to play outsized roles in shaping domestic immigration and asylum policy. Because of Germany’s prominent role as a leader in both European Union and international policy, their shift in sentiment toward refugees may also influence opinion and policy toward refugees in states all over the world.
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