

Toward a Realistic Assessment of the Gulf States Taking in Syrians

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Brief Analysis

Since 2011, the Arab Gulf monarchies have likely absorbed several hundred thousand Syrians under temporary circumstances.

Much confusion surrounds the extent to which Arab Gulf states have taken in Syrians fleeing the country's war. Figures cited in recent weeks range from zero to the millions. Understanding the Gulf's absorption of Syrians thus far is important when considering how to maximize support for Syrian refugees from these wealthy, politically invested countries. The discussion is most relevant for Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Kuwait. These countries have been key players in the war effort by providing major support to the Syrian opposition -- directly and indirectly -- and also leaders in providing humanitarian aid to refugees.

ESTIMATES

The number of Syrians now living in the Gulf who arrived after the start of the Syrian war in 2011 is likely several hundred thousand. The majority are in Saudi Arabia and the UAE -- the two most populous Gulf states. The kingdom's population is about 30 million, of which approximately one-third is non-Saudi, while the UAE's population is about 9.5 million, of which nearly 90 percent is non-Emirati. Like all other foreigners, the "new" Syrians live in the Gulf monarchies on a conditional basis with temporary permits.

In Saudi Arabia, a reasonable estimate for the number of new Syrians is in the low hundreds of thousands. About 500,000 Syrians currently reside in the kingdom, according to a regional representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and a majority are understood to have lived there before the war. A Saudi Foreign Ministry statement on September 11 claimed simply that "some hundreds of thousands" of Syrians had been given legal residency status since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict.

The kingdom stated in the same September 11 release that it has "received" 2.5 million Syrians since 2011. This

could be an estimate of all entries by Syrian nationals arriving from any country for any purpose during the period, including businesspeople, religious pilgrims, and the like. The vast majority would have since departed. Yet even by that definition, the figure seems unusually high. Also, to put the 2.5 million figure in perspective, about 4 million Syrians in total are estimated to have fled their country since 2011, primarily to neighboring states such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.

The UAE has provided more than 100,000 Syrians with residency permits since 2011, according to Emirati statements. Like in Saudi Arabia, this represents a significant increase from before the war, when the Syrian community numbered some 140,000, again according to Emirati statements. This would make the 240,000-plus Syrians now living in the UAE equal to about 20-25 percent of the Emirati national population.

The smaller states of Qatar (population 2.3 million, of which nearly 90 percent is non-Qatari) and Kuwait (population 4.1 million, of which almost 70 percent is non-Kuwaiti) have taken in far fewer Syrians since 2011. For Qatar, the most reliable figures range from 19,000 to 25,000, with the opposition Syrian National Coalition's ambassador in Qatar citing the lower figure, most recently in an interview published September 15, and Qatar's foreign minister citing the higher figure in an interview published September 29. Qatar has admitted some new Syrians -- this number is also disputed -- on visitor visas, prohibiting them from legal work.

Kuwait has taken the most restrictive position toward Syrians seeking work or refuge. In 2011, Kuwait banned entry to new Syrians along with members of five other nationalities whose countries were marred by crisis. The new rule was intended to stem the flow of Syrian and other refugees joining resident family members in Kuwait. Over time, Kuwait has eased this policy slightly. Also, earlier this month, Kuwait said it would not deport Syrian nationals whose visas had expired. For some years, Syrians have formed the second-largest Arab migrant community in Kuwait, with a total population of about 120,000 today.

Alongside the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have found temporary refuge in the Gulf since the war began, many others have been unable to stay because they could not find work; others were denied entry in the first place, and still others did not try to enter because of a general sense that the Gulf's doors were not open to them. Many of the Syrians who have been allowed to live in the Gulf since 2011 are family members of existing residents, businesspeople, or other well-connected individuals.

DRIVERS

Pressures that cut to the core of Gulf state stability will push the monarchies to continue limiting absorption of Syrians fleeing war. One such pressure involves decreasing the high percentage of noncitizens in their populations. Falling oil prices, high youth unemployment rates among nationals in some of the countries, and an increased sense of vulnerability have contributed to accelerated campaigns to nationalize the workforce and reduce dependence on foreigners.

Concern about security and stability in relation to Syrian nationals is another issue. This includes anxiety about the impact on Gulf societies of politicized Syrians, as well as the potential for infiltration by individuals intent on perpetrating violence against the state. These kinds of concerns are not limited to Syrians. They form part of a decades-long history of perceptions of Arab migrants as potential importers of destabilizing political trends and radicalism. This has contributed to the huge growth in Asian over Arab migrants in the Gulf states overall.

Finally, the practice of not accepting most immigrants on a permanent basis will preclude the kinds of long-term resettlement options for Syrians that are expected from Europe and the United States. All foreign residents in the Gulf are required to work, study, or engage in another legally sanctioned activity on a temporary basis -- or to be a family dependent of someone who does. Few exceptions have been granted in recent years. It is for this reason that many Syrians living in the Gulf feel insecure about their status there, and hope to settle in Europe.

A driving force behind most of these issues is the exclusive relationship Gulf rulers cultivate with their citizens. Traditionally, this has included extensive welfare benefits for most Gulf citizens paid for by oil and gas revenues -- though allowances have been eroded in recent years due to budgetary pressures. Expanding this kind of relationship to numerous migrants naturalized as Gulf citizens is judged to be economically unfeasible. It is also considered politically risky: would nonlocals who lack historical ties to the Gulf ruling families and who bring different political and social experiences be more apt to oppose the rulers?

LOOKING AHEAD

News of Syrians risking their lives to reach Europe has made some Gulf citizens question their governments' policies. Gulf leaderships are highly sensitive to the criticism. They may provide visas to more family members of Syrian residents, and expand support to Syrians already in the Gulf. Still, serious obstacles remain to a wider opening for new Syrian economic migrants. Indeed, such opportunities are reported to be contracting.

At the same time, Gulf financial aid for Syrian refugees is an area that holds strong potential for growth. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have been some of the largest humanitarian aid donors to Syrians until now, contributing hundreds of millions of dollars in food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and educational programs inside and outside Syria. Gulf donation rankings generally follow much larger economies such as the United States, Britain, and Germany.

The current spotlight on the Gulf countries will probably lead to announcements of new campaigns to support Syrian refugees. This is an important opportunity for states whose political system does allow for permanent incorporation of immigrants into their body politic to widen and deepen refugee support from the Gulf.

Lori Plotkin Boghardt is the Barbara Kay Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ♦♦

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