The Social Integration of Syrian Refugees in Germany

Key Findings

Drew Johnston, Martin Koenen, Prof. Theresa Kuchler, Dominic Russel, Prof. Johannes Stroebel

How successful have efforts been to socially integrate Syrian migrants in Germany? What factors influence social integration?

We address these questions in a new research paper working with de-identified data from Facebook.[1]

We construct samples of "Syrian" and native "German" users in Germany. Our sample of "Syrians" consists of 350k users who have spent a substantial amount of time in Syria, or who report a Syrian hometown.[2] Our sample of native "Germans" consists of 18 million users and is based on self-reported profile information, home region predictions, and German language usage.

We measure social integration[3] using three indicators:

1. The number of Facebook friendships that Syrians have with Germans
2. The share of public content shared by Syrians that is in German
3. The number of local Facebook groups, such as local soccer clubs, joined by Syrians

This unique data allows us to precisely measure social integration, generating a number of new insights. For example, we are able to document substantial differences in integration at the county-level and highlight factors that drive successful integration. Our findings are important for efforts around the world to facilitate the social integration of current and future refugees.

Finding 1: Syrians in Germany generally have low levels of social integration

The average Syrian in Germany has only five Facebook friendships with local Germans, and half of Syrians in Germany have one or fewer. For comparison, Germans, on average, have more than twenty times as many friendships to other local Germans. The other social integration indicators paint a similar picture.

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[1] The underlying research paper is "The Social Integration of International Migrants: Evidence from the Networks of Syrians in Germany" by Michael Bailey (Meta), Drew Johnson (Harvard), Martin Koenen (Harvard), Theresa Kuchler (NYU Stern), Dominic Russel (Harvard), Johannes Stroebel (NYU Stern).

[2] This definition of "Syrians" therefore includes people that did not necessarily enter Germany as refugees, as well as people who may not be Syrian nationals.

[3] While there is no single definition of social integration, the concept is often defined by the frequency of interactions of individuals of different groups. Importantly, there is a distinction between the two-sided process social integration and assimilation. The latter, which is defined in terms of cultural identity, is not the focus of our work.

Beyond these averages, there are substantial differences in integration across genders and age groups: men and younger Syrians living in Germany appear to be substantially more integrated than women and older Syrians.

Finding 2: There are large geographic differences in social integration

Figure 1 shows large geographic differences in the social integration of Syrians living in Germany. Syrians living in blue regions have, on average, more than twice as many Facebook friends as Syrians living in orange regions.

Rural areas have the highest degree of social integration. For example, Syrians in rural regions of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Lower Saxony, Rhineland-Palatinate, and southern Bavaria have more than seven German Facebook friends on average. In contrast, the social integration of Syrians in medium-sized cities such as Ansbach, Kaiserslautern, and Cottbus is comparatively low. The integration of Syrians living in Germany's largest cities such as Berlin, Munich, and Cologne are somewhere in between.
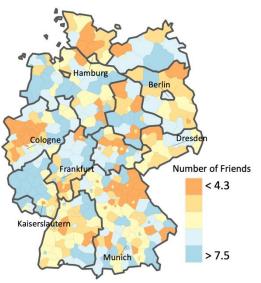

Figure. 1: Map of Social Integration

Finding 3: Local environments, rather than people, largely explain regional differences

There are two possible explanations for these regional differences in integration outcomes. On the one hand, these differences could be due to the causal impact of local environments, including local institutions and policies. On the other hand, the differences could be due to differences in the populations living in the different locations. For example, it could be that Germans in some places are more open towards Syrians, or that Syrians living in some locations are more eager to integrate.

To differentiate between these explanations, we use a research design that compares the integration of "movers", who move one location (e.g., Kaiserslautern) to another (e.g., Cologne), with the integration of "stayers", who permanently live in these locations.

We observe that, prior to moving, Syrian movers have the same rate of integration as Syrian stayers in their origin location (in the example above, Kaiserslautern). Immediately after moving, their rate of integration becomes similar to that of Syrian stayers in their destination location (e.g., Cologne). This finding suggests regional integration patterns are not driven by systematic differences Syrians' willingness to integrate across counties. The patterns above, then, are not due to differences in the Syrian population.

The same methodology also helps us to understand the role of the German population. When *Germans* move across locations, their rate of making Syrian friends also adjusts quickly to the rate of stayers. However, the adjustment isn't full, in particular for older Germans. Differences in the

German populations across places therefore contribute somewhat to the observed regional differences in integration outcomes. However, the observed substantial (if not full) adjustment in the behavior of movers suggests that other local factors play an even more important role.

Finding 4: Integration courses help facilitate successful integration

Given the important role of place-based factors, we study the effect of federally-funded integration courses[4], whose availability varied substantially across locations.

Our findings in Figure 2 show that Syrians in locations with more completed integration courses are, on average, better integrated.

Further analyses (using an instrumental variables approach) show that this relationship is *causal*. This suggests that increasing the availability of integration courses can lead to both higher-levels of German language knowledge and social integration.
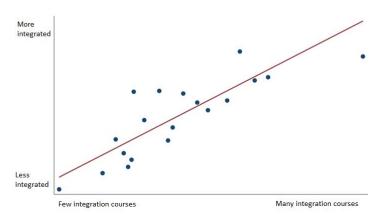
Figure 2: Integration Courses and Social Integration

Finding 5: Initial contact leads to follow-on contacts

Finding 3 highlighted that differences across the German population contributed to explaining some of the regional differences in integration. We therefore also studied what factors explain differences in the probability of Germans of becoming friends with local Syrians.

We find that German men and younger Germans have more contact with Syrians, perhaps because the population of Syrian migrants in Germany is disproportionately male and young.

In addition, we find that Germans who had contact with Syrians in one setting are often more likely to also befriend Syrians in other settings. We study this in the context of high schools. Germans who shared a high school cohort with a Syrian student have more subsequent friendship links with Syrians outside of high school compared to Germans in the same high school but without a Syrian student in their cohort. Initial contact can thus facilitate substantial follow-on relationships.

This finding suggests that policies that generate opportunities for interactions between Germans and Syrians have the potential to generate long-lasting improvements in integration outcomes.

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[4] Integration courses, which are intended to teach migrants the German language and other relevant information, are "at the core of the government's integration measures." Over a million individuals have taken these courses since 2015.