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Syrian Refugees in German Cities

Resettlement Dynamics and its Impact on the Urban Structures across the City



This is the seventh article in our series on refugees. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

by *Ghiath Al Jebawi*

This article deals with the accommodation of Syrian refugees living in Germany. Based on my personal experience living in a refugee camp („Heim“) in the city of Cologne (Köln), and based on relevant literature, the article will, firstly, address the different types of temporary residences for refugees in Germany, and, secondly, the process through which refugees pass while looking for a permanent accommodation. Thirdly, and most importantly, the article discusses the ongoing shift within Köln's urban and social structure in the light of the emerging resettlement of refugees. Although the urban structure of Köln, like many other German cities, has a certain level of urban segregation manifested in the settlement of immigrant communities (Friedrichs 1998, p.1), I argue that, on the contrary, the resettlement of Syrian refugees shows coherence and dispersion. The article is accompanied by a mapping survey that investigates on the spatial aspect of the accommodation distribution.

Within the current refugee crisis, the particular case of Syrian refugees is that it doesn't have a visible resolution: their country's situation is consistently deteriorating and it is likely that they will remain in the countries that are hosting them, mainly in Germany. Syrian refugees often state that they have the desire to finish their period in the „Heim“ and to move to a permanent accommodation. The reason could be related to the conditions in the „Heim“ itself, but more fundamentally this desire is attributed to the need for a permanent stability which they lack since the beginning of the Syrian war.

Living in the „Heim“

Refugees are distributed to temporary residences, „Heime“, that differ from each other regarding their conditions: the city they are in, their location within the city and their original function before being employed as a „Heim“. Some of these residences might have originally been social housing, hotels, hangars, and recently whatever else secures a space to host the large flux of arrivals.

From my personal experience in a „Heim“ in Köln-Poll and questioning friends from the refugees' community, I concluded that the conditions within these residences widely vary. Some are perfectly sufficient and host two persons or even just one person in a private studio with all its services. The situation in others is of less quality and ranges up to bathrooms shared by ten persons. Some of these residences only host Syrians and others mix them with different groups of immigrants from the Arab world, Eastern Europe/the Balkans and Africa. In these cases, Syrian refugees share rooms with other Arabs, or share services like kitchens and bathrooms. In other cases, there is a mixture within the same building with people from Eastern

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Europe. On a third level of mixture, like in the case of the „Heim“ in Köln-Poll, they are sharing the semi-public space in between two buildings, while one is only for Syrians and other only for people from Eastern Europe.

Refugees gain different advantages by their stay in the „Heim“ such as receiving periodicals or fairly frequent aid services and having more possibilities to encounter the institutions and persons that take care of refugees. Another advantage is staying in touch with the collective knowledge that is circulated in the camp, mainly on interesting issues affecting their new lives. Nevertheless, and although these different types of residences provide different levels of comfort, all Syrian refugees still seek the soonest possible permanent residence for the purpose of stability. The life of the average Syrian within the pre-war period was static and stable, so the experience of the past years urges a strong need to re-stabilize.

The search for individual accommodation: everyday obstacles

There are several difficulties refugees are facing when looking for an individual permanent accommodation. Based on my observations in the camp, most of the people do not look for an accommodation by themselves. The reason is their incapacity to cope with the demands of language and a lacking familiarity with the normal dynamics in the German system. On the other hand, landlords and house owners only respond very reluctantly when realizing that they will have to deal with the „Jobcenter“¹. In this case, however, there is a big fallacy because dealing with the „Jobcenter“, in terms of payment, is very secure as it is a state agency. This behavior might be related to a tendency by landlords and property owners towards rejecting immigrants:

“

The concentration of immigrants in certain quarters seems to be only slightly related to the immigrants' choice to live in close proximity to people with the same country of origin. Choice even to live close to one's family seems to be a smaller factor than constrains imposed on immigrant households. Ethnic segregation is not only caused by this group's weaker socioeconomic standing on the housing market but also but also by discrimination of some housing providers. (GdW 1998, p. 23)

(Münch 2009, p.5)

As almost all refugees are not able to find accommodation in the classical way a German citizen would, they depend on different institutions helping them, such as the Caritas, the Red Cross and the department of residence in the „Ausländeramt“ (immigration office) itself. Most of those who want to move out of the „Heim“ register in one of these institutions and are put on a waiting list. Refugees can express their preferences of the location, which is usually one of the areas where the already existing migrant community and infrastructure can help to fulfill their basic cultural needs (halal food, communication, etc.) (see map 1). However, they usually do not express such preferences because they fear it might reduce the possibility of getting an adequate accommodation and it might defer the process it for an even longer time. When the institutions find an accommodation for someone, they show it to the refugee who has the right to approve or reject the option, and wait

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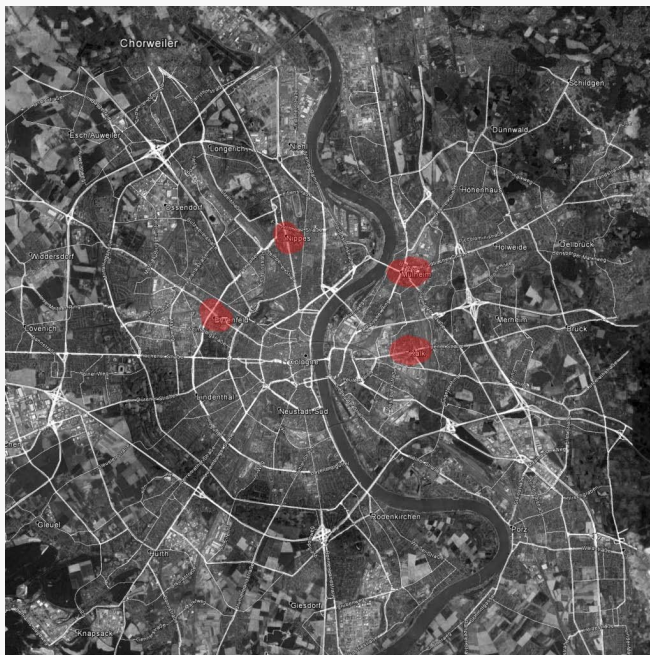
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for another opportunity. Very often refugees focus more on the technical conditions of the residence itself than on its location, as long as it is in the city itself.



Map 1: Zones with a high percentage of Arab and Turkish population in the city of Köln

As refugees cannot afford the costs of an accommodation, they depend on the financial support of the „Jobcenter“. Once the accommodation is available, the „Jobcenter“ verifies that the rent doesn't exceed the legal limit which is different according to the number and ages of the family members. The price limit for rents generally filters the possibilities to choose a location within the city's central and expensive areas. The „Jobcenter“ also takes some time to agree on paying the deposit and the commissions.

As refugees long for permanent residence urgently, they normally tend to not register a preference of location and to accept the first suitable accommodation. Altogether, this factor, the particularities of the supporting institutions and the other difficulties dominating the refugees' situation form a set of imposed dynamics that restrict their possibilities of choice. Furthermore, these factors constitute a complex system that distributes Syrian refugees dispersedly in different territories across the city.

Urban circumstances and consequences of the current resettlement

The resettlement of refugees within German cities implies a permanent distribution in the different territories. The form of this distribution, consequently, contributes to the form of the city itself, especially if we regard the high **number of expected refugees**. Not only the urban character of the city is reshaped over this period, but also its social, economic and cultural networks. As sources from the 1990s already indicate, the city of Köln already includes segregated territories of immigrants (Friedrichs 1998, p.1); this raises the question on the urban form that the city is taking over this period.

Urban Segregation – Urban Dispersion

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The positive side-effects of certain degrees and forms of neighborhood specialisation are hardly ever touched upon in the literature. This raises the question of whether we

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really should be as concerned about (new manifestations of) urban segregation.

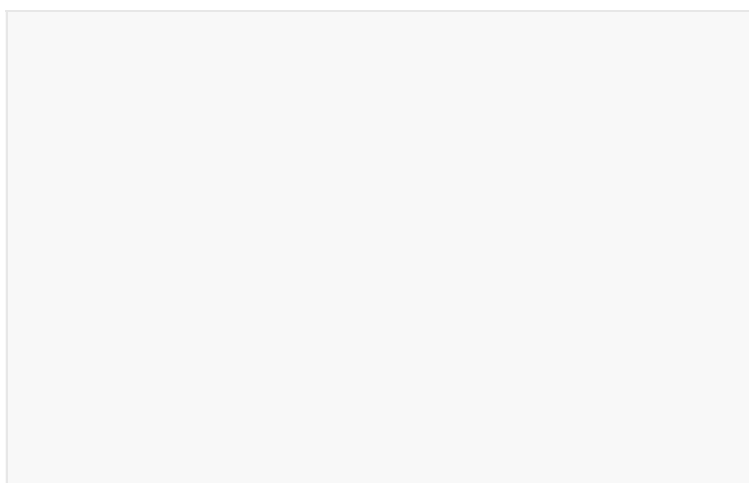
(Smets/Salman 2008, p. 6)

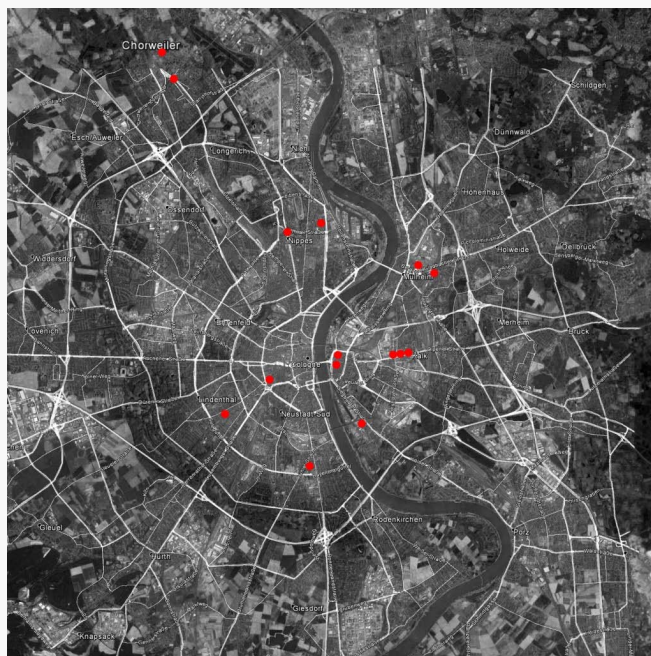
I argue that the focal positioning of immigrant groups could contribute to a new cultural character in some districts because it provides certain types of shops, restaurants, cultural venues, etc. In the case of Köln, this is manifested mainly in the districts of Kalk, Mülheim, Nippes and others where the Turkish and Arabic communities reside (see map 1). At the same time, this argument ignores that this cultural character applies on the cases of less integrated territories:

“ [The] spatial segregation is often connected to social cleavages in, for example, the labour and education market, further contributing to income inequality (Ratcliffe 2002, pp. 23, 30-33; Robinson, 2002, p. 96). When an ethnic dimension is added [like in the case of Syrians, ed. note] this can also reinforce ethnic segregation at schools. (Smets/Salman 2008, p. 5)

This, in the long term, could boost heterogeneous economic, social and cultural networks that operate out of the general frame of the city: „There is indeed increasing evidence for negative effects of living in a segregated neighborhood on socioeconomic outcomes of minority members“ (Sager 2011, p. 3). Accordingly, if the Syrian refugees resettled in the already segregated territories, they would, in the long term, suffer more from the lack of integration, and they will deepen the effects of segregation on the city itself: „Highly segregated and less integrated cities do not match the newly required city profiles. On the contrary, those cities would exacerbate urban poverty (Massey and Denton, 1993)“ (Musterd 2006, p. 5).

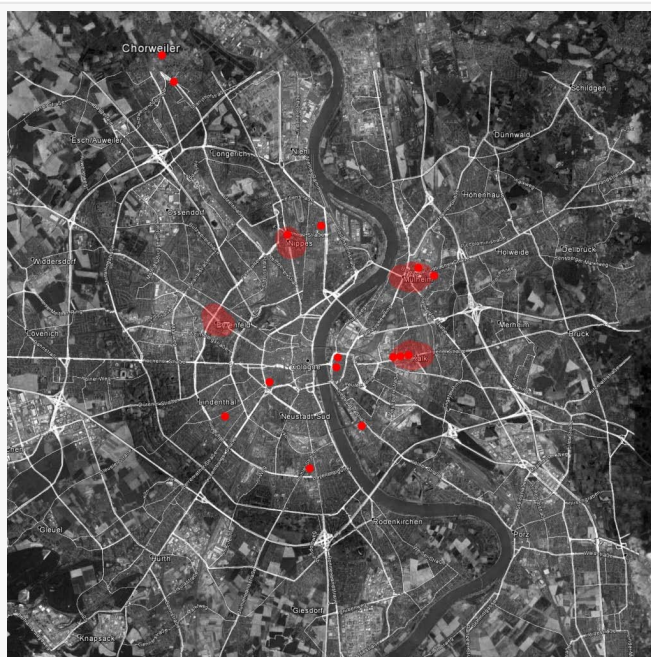
On the contrary, if dispersed in different neighborhoods across the city, the emerging community still can be dependent on the previously established communities of similar cultures, such as the Arabic and Turkish (see map 1), in order to obtain some basic cultural needs. On the other hand, it could be an advantage if the Syrian community was scattered across the different territories around the city, and consequently is able to integrate socially, culturally and economically: „More mixed neighborhoods will enhance individual social opportunities and thus, on aggregate, strengthen the urban economy“ (Musterd 2006, p. 1).





Map 2: Disperse distribution of the Syrian refugees in their permanent residences in the city of Köln

Map 2 shows the positioning of the permanent accommodation of randomly selected Syrian refugees in Köln and indicates a clear dispersion rather than concentration (see map 2). The new spots hardly overlap with the current segregated territories (see map 3), which reflects an even distribution of the emerging refugees within the city. It can be observed that the area of the center has no locations inhabited by refugees, whereas Kalk, with three locations, has a slight concentration. This can be attributed to the high costs and scarcity of residential facilities in the center, and to the desire of Syrians to resettle in Kalk and other districts with a big migrant population for the cultural advantages that it provides. Probably, those who resettle in the immigrants' territories would have fewer chances to visit the „German“ shops, restaurants and other facilities than those who live in other areas across the city. In the other areas, even the first generation of refugees settling now would, for example, buy goods from the „German“ markets, visit „German“ facilities and get in touch more with linguistic and cultural aspects than those in immigrants' areas. In parallel, children will have much better chances of integration when going to school with German children; a simple example of the social, cultural and economic exchange.



Map 3: Ongoing diffusion of immigrants caused by the disperse resettlement of Syrian refugees in the city of Köln

Threats and conclusions

In the future, the consistent influx of refugees and the urgent need they create residences could result in keeping immigrants in the same camps where they arrived because of the lack of capacity of the urban resources to cope with the emerging needs.

The system that guides the Syrian refugees' resettlement restricts their possibilities of choice. Furthermore, it results in a disperse spatial (see map 3) describes a case of urban dispersion across the city rather than an urban segregation. However, a slight concentration could be observed in areas of immigrants.

Although there is a level of urban segregation in Köln and it is in a deterioration progress (Friedrichs 1998, p. 1), this emerging group of Syrian immigrants does not contribute to the current segregation. On the contrary, it fosters the diffusion of the concentration of the total immigrants' community across the city. This improves the minorities' urban integration with the hosting community within the different territories across the city, which has positive effects on both, the original community and the emerging minorities.

Ghiath Al Jebawi was born in Damascus in 1984. He is a Syrian architect, currently studying masters of architecture at Politecnico di Milano, Italy. He studied architecture and urban planning at the University of Damascus, where he worked as an assistant teacher until his departure to Lebanon. Later, living in Italy, he worked in translation, art and architecture. He often visits his family in Köln since they settled there in 2014.

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Besides my personal experiences of living in a temporal refugees residence for three months among Syrian families in Köln-Poll and the circulated knowledge based on their personal experiences, this article quoted different academic papers and Journals:

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1. Unemployed refugees have the right to receive social benefits from the state. The „Jobcenter“ is the state agency for employment, which bears the costs for rent and deposit of unemployed refugees. 

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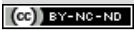
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