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"I don't want to be paid for being a refugee!"
A CMES seminar on Syrians in the Öresund Region
Torsten Janson

On Friday June 10 2016, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at Lund University arranged a seminar devoted to explore refugee experiences among Syrians in the Öresund region. Organizers were CMES researchers Dalia Abdelhady and Joshka Wessels. Lund University and international researchers in law, religious studies, refugee studies, environmental studies, urban sociology and anthropology participated, as well as representatives from civil society organizations in the region.

Research presentation

The discussions took as a point of departure the preliminary findings of Dalia Abdelhady and Joshka Wessels pilot project, "Syrians in the Öresund", exploring refugee experiences in the Copenhagen region and South Sweden. The research is based on interviews, documentation and observations among refugees who have been at least one year in the region. It explores narratives among the participants about the trauma of fleeing the home country, the arduous journey towards safety and, most notably, the making of a new life in Scandinavia. So far a mere 16 interviews have been conducted. Thus the data set is narrow and not representative as concerns educational background, age or gender, the researchers underscore. Yet already a number of important findings and follow up questions for further research emerge.

The experiences of interacting with local authorities in Scandinavia have generally been good, yet sometimes frustrating. The lack of meaningful activity while waiting for residence permit is a recurring experience. However, the participants are also notably resourceful and ambitious. Apart from the language training offered, they seek out further opportunities of language training and internships.

A recurrent aspect is the longing for a more active community life. Notably, there is not much evidence to suggest that a specific "Syrian" community is emerging so far. Behind this we find old divisions and suspiciousness, echoing the divisions and conflicts of the home country left behind. Most participants still have family in Syria, which is a constant source of concern and anxiety. This also affects the engagement in community life in the new host societies. In their self-reflections on the meaning of "being Syrian", the participants rather underscore the importance of cultural life. This is connected to a sense of nostalgia with a homeland forever lost. The importance of food, music, dance, social life and hospitality are recurring themes.

Dalia Abdelhady and Joshka Wessels are careful not to draw any overall conclusions about the refugee experience at this early point of research. Yet a number of themes emerge for further exploration. One seems to be a sense of a "survival guilt": why did I make it and not the others? This in turn translates into a sense of obligation to make a meaningful and valuable life in the new society. There is most notably a refusal to accept the refugee label, a refusal against

victimization. One participant formulated it as an unwillingness to accept grants from Swedish authorities, rather than relying on own capabilities: "I don't want to be paid for being a refugee!" Secondly, there is a recurrent uncertainty of the future. This not only reflects a lack of a long-term control over one's destiny, but a foundational difficulty in thinking ahead. And again: the importance of culture in making sense of current existence emerges as a third central theme.

Roundtable

In the roundtable discussions following the presentation, a number of perspectives were highlighted. Experiences of housing, of education and labor and of the role of cultural and artistic expression were some of the major themes in the questions discussed. Among the questions discussed we found:

- What experiences of the participants are unique to the Öresund region? How can the current regional vision for Öresund economic integration support integration and emancipation among the participants? And what are the differences of making a life in urban and rural environments? What are the hopes of the participants to pursue professional lives reflecting their educational backgrounds?
- How does the housing shortage affect the participants? What does it mean for community building efforts to constantly be on the move? How are they affected by black market actors and economical exploitation? How can the dire waiting periods involved in the refugee experience be handled, through improved routines from the authorities and activities from organizations? How do we avoid adding yet a traumatizing experience to refugees by placing them in endless months of inactivity?
- How can we improve the understanding and organization of the refugee situation by involving members of the newly arrived communities and listening to their experiences in building new lives? How can we interconnect findings from research, policy making and authority activity?
- How can we assist newly arrived groups in providing support for self-empowerment in public space? How can we provide platforms for Syrians' community building, agency and self-understanding, creating opportunities while not micromanaging cultural and artistic activities?
- What is the interaction of the participants and local authorities and organizations in constructing versions of "Syrian culture" in the sense of an invented tradition? Who determines the content of culture and what forms will work in a Scandinavian setting? How can culture contribute to sustainable community constructions – and what problems may be involved?

Looking ahead: a new network established

In sum, the seminar was highly productive in identifying a number of themes for further research as well as applied practices among community organizations.

The immediate outcome of the seminar was the creation of a joint network for research and applied community activity, in order to exchange ideas and experiences for practices. The role of cultural and artistic productions was highlighted as one central theme for such exchange. Another central theme concerns housing. The ambition of the network is to combine the research and practice based knowledge in promoting knowledge-based policies and inventive forms for supporting agency and sustainability among the members of the Scandinavian Syrian communities.