Refugees but not Refugees: The UAE’s Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis Viewed through the Lived Experience of Syrians in Abu Dhabi

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MS received March 2020; revised MS received November 2020

The UAE is not a signatory to the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. As such, it does not recognize individuals fleeing war or persecution as refugees. Instead, the UAE has allowed for the presence of Syrians and other vulnerable populations within its existing migration framework, the kafala system, using the temporary visas offered under this labour migration system as ‘an asylum policy by proxy’ or ‘quasi-asylum policy’. Despite this restrictive local response, the UAE is extremely generous internationally. The contradictory nature of the UAE’s response will be highlighted, where on one hand, it restricts admissions, yet on the other, it has been generous in terms of international aid to the Syrian crisis—the UAE’s version of the grand compromise. This research ultimately aims to understand how the UAE’s policy of ‘migrants’ (referring to temporary labour admissions), not ‘refugees’, and its ‘quasi-asylum policy’ has impacted the lived experience of a group of vulnerable Syrian families in Abu Dhabi.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, refugees, migration

Introduction

The policy of the Gulf countries has been not to accept Syrians as refugees (Fathalla 2015). As the Syrian refugee crisis unfolded (and with countries in the Middle East hosting millions of refugees), the stance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), remained steadfast. They would not accept Syrians fleeing the violence as refugees.

Instead, Syrians were accepted within the UAE’s established migration framework. The UAE (as well as other GCC countries) have an established system for receiving large numbers of foreigners of all nationalities and skill levels as temporary migrant workers, and more recently as students (Kamrava and Babar
In all six GCC countries, non-nationals make up a significant proportion of the population and in some (UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) the number of non-nationals greatly outnumbers citizens. The migration framework makes it relatively easy (compared with many other countries) for migrants of all skill-levels to live and work in the GCC.

With a foreign population that outnumbers its local population (non-national population stands at 89 per cent of the population) (GLMM 2017), the UAE has long been concerned about this demographic imbalance and is therefore especially aware of the demographic make-up of the population, careful to ensure that no single group has a powerful majority (Kapiszewski 2006). In fact, according to the UAE government, they aim to balance the demographics between expatriates and nationals by 2021 (UAE Government 2020a). This has been one reason that the UAE has maintained its migration framework, to ensure that there is no permanent migration. It is well understood that all migrants who live and work in the UAE do so on a temporary basis, and thus, the majority of expatriates in the UAE view their stay as temporary (Valenta et al. 2020). Long-term visas (5 and 10 years in duration, as opposed to a maximum of 3 years) were introduced in 2019, though with very selective criteria for eligibility (UAE Government 2019).

Despite the apparent and theoretical temporariness of the migrant population, there are many who have held resident status in the UAE since the formation of the federation in 1971, continuously renewing their residence permits and considering the UAE as ‘home’. Most notable of these groups are the Palestinian, Lebanese and Indian communities, but there is also a long-standing Syrian community in the UAE (Vora 2013).

The exact number of Syrians in the UAE is unknown, but according to the UAE government there were approximately 140,000 Syrians before the start of the crisis in 2011 (UAE Embassy in the United States 2019). These Syrians came as economic migrants in the pre-conflict phase, and as the situation deteriorated in Syria, they became mixed migrants (Klaauw 2010). These were joined by approximately 100,000 more, arriving since the start of the crisis (UAE Embassy in the United States 2019). The newcomers most commonly have been family members of Syrian migrant workers who had already been established in the country.

While the majority of Syrians in the UAE may not be considered vulnerable, there is a subset, both with and without valid resident visas, who are struggling to survive in the UAE and exist in a state of vulnerability. Without a valid visa and/or sufficient financial resources, these Syrian families are unable to access many services, such as education and healthcare. Even mobile services, bank accounts and tenancy agreements all require a valid residence visa. This research examines the lives of some of these vulnerable Syrian families in Abu Dhabi.

This research aims to understand the lived experience of Syrian families in Abu Dhabi who struggle to obtain the basic essentials of life. This research was conducted as a series of interviews with families who presented an informal education programme in Abu Dhabi. While this research is not meant to present as an ethnographic study, the author’s interaction with the families extended beyond the interview period and an understanding of their circumstances was due to this
interaction. This study will explore the trajectory that has led these families to be in this position and how they navigate the complexity of the UAE’s bureaucratic system to eke out an existence in extremely difficult circumstances. While this study presents the lived experiences of a specific group of vulnerable Syrians in Abu Dhabi, it does not claim to be representative of other vulnerable Syrian populations in the UAE.

The UAE’s specific response to Syrians can be contextualized within its existing migration framework (the kafala system). This framework has been used to accommodate Syrians as migrants rather than refugees due to the lack of specific regulations governing individuals requiring humanitarian assistance, thereby creating a quasi-asylum system or asylum by proxy (Thiollet 2011). Yet, despite limited protection and support for Syrians within its borders, the UAE has been generous at supporting refugees outside its borders, creating the UAE’s version of the ‘grand compromise’. This paper will highlight the lives of a particular group of Syrian families and the challenges they face as a consequence of the UAE’s domestic response.

The UAE’s Migration Framework

The UAE (as well as the other GCC countries) is not a signatory to the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Thus, in this context, an examination of the reception practices of individuals from war-torn countries has to move beyond existing legal migration categories that are based on a voluntary-forced migration dichotomy (Valenta and Jakobsen 2018). Instead, the reception of Syrians (and individuals from other war-torn countries) could be examined within the existing migration framework via the kafala or sponsorship system.

The sponsorship system or kafala has been the central feature of migration policy in the UAE since migrant workers began arriving. This system depends on all migrants having a local sponsor (an individual or organization), who is responsible for obtaining work and residency permits. Sponsorship requires the sponsor to assume full economic and legal responsibility for the employee during the contract period. The sponsor acts as the official intermediary between the foreigner and the administration. Upon sponsorship, the sponsor declares that the foreigner works for them, and undertakes to inform the Immigration Department of any change in the labour contract (expiry, renewal or cancellation), or in the worker’s status. The sponsor also pledges, at their own expense, to repatriate the employee upon termination of the contract.

The sponsorship system, by law, requires that the sponsor and the employer are the same person or institution. Once in possession of a work contract and an entry and residence permit, the migrant worker is tied to their sponsor–employer (Longva 1999). However, there has recently been an amendment to this law that now allows expatriates to work part-time for another employer who is not their sponsor (UAE Government 2020b). In recent years, laws such as just described are testament to much wider reform of the UAE kafala system (Khan & Harroff-Tavel, 2011; Valenta et al. 2020). Yet, the kafala system still structures...
the relationship between the migrant, the local sponsor and the state. It gives sponsors the possibility to control a foreign worker’s entry into and departure from the country as well as their legal and professional status (Castles and Miller 2009). This has put the kafala system under scrutiny for being exploitative (Keane and McGeehan, 2008).

Social welfare benefits provided for citizens are not extended to migrants. Free medical care, free education from primary school to university level and low-cost housing are provided only to the local population. Foreign communities are, however, permitted to create privately financed schools for their own children. Employers often provide medical insurance so that employees have access to healthcare, and in some cases, an accommodation allowance or accommodation is provided (Weiner 1990). This, however, depends on the migrants being sponsored and/or employed.

This system allows the admission of large numbers of migrant workers of different socio-economic status and nationalities, serving as a mechanism whereby anyone, from any country, can legally live and work in the UAE, in a way where the skills provided by foreigners compliment, as opposed to compete with, that of the local population (Hvidt 2019) These ‘liberal’ labour migrant regimes contrast sharply with the UAE’s restrictive refugee policies.

The UAE’s Unique Approach to the Syrian Refugees Crisis
An asylum system is virtually non-existent in the UAE, and refugees are not recognized within its legal framework that classifies non-nationals. Thus, the UAE government does not refer to people of concern as refugees and does not grant them the rights declared in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, regardless of their vulnerability. Instead, the UAE has used its temporary labour migration policy as ‘an asylum policy by proxy’ or ‘quasi-asylum policy’ (Thiollet 2011). In other words, there is no legal framework in the UAE to govern individuals requiring humanitarian assistance. Instead, the government has used the existing migration system to accommodate and accept these individuals.

The UAE (and GCC) are not the only Middle Eastern countries that have not signed the Refugee Convention, yet ‘host’ individuals who would otherwise be classed as refugees. Syria’s neighbours, who have received large numbers of Syrians (Jordan, Lebanon), are also not signatories to the Refugee Convention (UNHCR 2010, 2013). However, both have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UNHCR to accommodate for the presence and management of refugees and have articles in their constitution that prevent non-refoulement of refugees (UNHCR, 2010, 2013). In Jordan and Lebanon, Syrians have access to public education and healthcare, but their access employment is limited to particular sectors that do not compete with the local population. Turkey, which hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees, is a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, though maintains geographical limitations (UNHCR 2014), meaning that Syrians are not referred to as refugees. As in Jordan and Lebanon, education and healthcare are available. However, they
can legally work in any sector, though with quotas in place to restrict the number of Syrians employed. Thus, in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, Syrians are given some of the rights accorded to refugees (education, healthcare, and some access to employment as well as the guarantee of non-refoulement), despite these countries not being party to the Refugee Convention. They are refugees in all but name. This is in contrast to the UAE, and most of the GCC, which also has no legislation that accommodates for refugees and does not afford persons of concern the rights of refugees, including access to public healthcare and education. Notably, in 2018, Qatar passed legislation that allowed individuals to claim political asylum (Qatar-America Institute 2018).

Despite its official restrictive policies with regard to asylum, the UAE, though unofficially, has had a lenient stance toward Syrian residents. In the years following the crisis, anecdotal evidence suggests that it had become increasingly difficult for Syrians to renew their work visas (De Bel-Air 2015), often apparently not passing security clearances. This left a large number of Syrians in the UAE irregular, i.e. with no valid residence visas. Yet, there had been no negative repercussions against Syrians; there had been no mass deportations of irregular Syrians, nor any prosecutions for being illegal. The government had also been lenient with fines for expired visas, often accepting requests by UNHCR to waive fines (Shaikh 2017). Though this lenience was not reflected in official policy, it demonstrates a willingness of the UAE to do its part for Syrians fleeing conflict.

The perceived relaxed attitude toward Syrians was also evident in the 2016 announcement at the Leaders’ Summit on Refugees at the United Nations by Reem Al Hashimy, Minister of State for International Cooperation. At this event, Al Hashimy announced that the UAE would accept 15,000 Syrian refugees over the following five years (Malek 2016). However, at the time of writing (June 2019) and review (December 2020), there has been no evidence of any Syrians arriving in the UAE under this scheme. No other GCC state had made such a public commitment. This announcement led the way for a re-focus of the UAE authorities (and society) toward the plight of Syrians. Subsequently, UAE government officials visited refugee-receiving countries (Germany and Canada) to learn how they have adapted to the arrival of refugees. In the summer of 2018, the UAE announced an amnesty that would issue a one-year residency visa, regardless of previous residency status and an exemption from fines, for individuals from war-torn countries, thus allowing those who had been irregular to normalize their status (The National 2018). These visas eliminated the need to have a sponsor and allowed Syrians who had been irregular for many years to obtain residence visas.

Despite the UAE’s lack of official asylum policies and recognition of refugees within its borders, it has been a generous donor of humanitarian aid for Syrian (and other) refugees hosted in other countries. In fact, the UAE has long been the most generous donor of humanitarian aid per capita globally (Al Mezaini 2011), and its response to the Syrian crisis has reflected this. In 2015, the UAE government funded the construction of the sewage system in Zaatari Camp in Jordan (Al Wasmi 2015). The funding for this project is part of a total contribution of nearly US$5 million to UNHCR by the UAE government in early 2014 (Emirates
Between 2017 and 2018, UAE government’s donations to UNHCR approximated US$7.5m (Emirates 24/7 2018). At the start of 2019, the UAE provided winter aid funding of over US$4 million for Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Greece and Egypt (The National 2019). The UAE also funds and runs, via the Emirates Red Crescent, the Mrajeeb Al Fhood refugee camp in Jordan, hosting approximately 6,500 Syrian refugees. Mrajeeb Al Fhood, considered ‘a five-star camp’, prioritizes widowed women with children, single women, the elderly, disabled and large families. Single men are not allowed (Capri 2015).

The UAE has contributed US$ 72 million to various refugee camps hosting Syrians, in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. In January 2015, the UAE pledged US$ 100 million in support of Syrian refugees, and since 2012, it has provided over US$530 million in humanitarian aid and development assistance to address the Syrian crisis, directly and through the Syria Recovery Trust Fund established by the UAE, USA and Germany (UAE Embassy in the United States 2019).

Support for refugees among the business community has also been evident. It is important to note that the business community, particularly the merchant families, is very much linked to the ruling elite, and their support for the Syrian refugee crisis remained aligned with official government policy. As the government’s humanitarian aid to support Syrian refugees evolved, so did the response from the UAE business community. There have been donations from the Sharjah Media Corporation of over US$800,000 for a clinic in Zaatari (Achkhanian 2017), and from Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair, through the Al Ghurair Foundation for Education, of over US$27 million to support refugee children accessing education, with the first of three rounds of funding targeting children in Jordan, Lebanon and the UAE (Ryan 2018). It is interesting to note that the inclusion of ‘refugee’ children in the UAE in the Al Ghurair Foundation for Education pledge was perhaps the first public acknowledgment that there were Syrian children in the UAE who were not able to access education for financial reasons.

The UAE’s approach to the refugee crisis and Syrians who might, in different contexts (i.e. in other host countries), be considered refugees remains aligned with its political framework and state institutions. Syrians are treated as any other migrant worker in terms of rights and privileges, with similar legal status as any other migrant. Yet, the apparent relaxation in attitudes from the UAE authorities has marked a shift in attitude to, and recognition of, those who were vulnerable within its borders. While the UAE is neither expected to emulate the policies of traditional refugee resettlement countries, such as Canada, the USA or Germany, nor does it wish to copy the situation in the Middle East refugee host countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, it has responded to the Syrian refugee crisis according to its own terms; a ‘quasi-asylum policy’ within its established migration framework.

The UAE’s ‘Grand Compromise’

The UAE’s response to Syrian refugee crisis, nevertheless, appears contradictory. On one hand, by adopting a quasi-asylum policy, where (vulnerable) Syrians are included into the existing migration framework and provided few of the
international protections accorded to refugees, the UAE have accepted only very few Syrians; those with family ties, i.e. those who had relatives resident and easily able to reunite with family members. On the other hand, the UAE provides significant funding to support Syrian refugees outside the UAE, both unilaterally, directly to refugee-hosting countries and multilaterally, via UN institutions. In fact, the UAE government provides basic services for Syrians who live outside the UAE (e.g. education, healthcare and shelter in the Mrajeeb Al Fhood camp) that Syrians in the UAE are not afforded.

This contradiction has significant parallels with what Cuéller (2006) describes as a grand compromise; the system of global refugee management between states in the Global South and states in the Global North. Essentially, according to Arar (2017a), the grand compromise entails that states in the Global North pay to contain refugee populations outside their borders and thereby protect their sovereignty. Arar continues that these payments can be in the form of contributions to the UNHCR or can be money given directly to the refugee-hosting state or other economic contributions.

This means that the burden of accommodating for refugees is placed firmly on countries in the Global South, in this case Jordan, Lebanon and to a lesser extent Turkey (though Turkey may not be considered as part of the Global South). Most significantly, within the grand compromise, states in the Global North do not depend on UNHCR for aid (Arar 2017b) and are thus exempt from domestic involvement of international institutions in refugee-governance, namely UNHCR (Kagan 2011).

Thus, the UAE’s version of the grand compromise allows it to ‘select’ those Syrians that can remain (note that within the UAE migration framework, visas can be rejected without reason), thereby protecting its sovereignty, and not dealing with the challenges of states that have accepted large numbers of Syrian refugees, i.e. demographic shifts, societal tensions and economic woes. Moreover, the UAE is also spared any international involvement (most specifically from the UNHCR) in domestic affairs as it does not depend on aid. While UNHCR has a presence in the UAE, and fulfils its mandate of protection, it has limited influence with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. In fact, the UNHCR views the UAE to be an important actor for fund-raising for its international efforts, and as described above, the UAE has given generously to support refugees abroad. This has somewhat ‘excused’ the UAE from accepting more Syrians.

Methodology

This research was set in the context of an informal education programme that was established in October 2018 to provide support for Syrian children (and families) who did not have access to formal education in Abu Dhabi. The author was involved in the initiative and established friendly relationships with the families. The children’s parents (and often their extended families) were interviewed under informed consent for this research. The families understood the reasons for the meeting and that their participation was voluntary. The position of the author as
an insider due to the programme helped to establish a trusting relationship between the researcher and the interviewees, allowing the families to share stories and information that they would not share with an outsider.

The interviews were conducted over an eight-week period, from January to March 2019. The interviews took place in the homes of the families and were informal discussions about their overall situation in the UAE, including their children’s access to education. A total of 11 homes were visited, though in four of these homes there were more than one nuclear family present. Thus, in total, 16 families were interviewed. Moreover, the author’s interaction with the families and involvement in the programme continues to the time of reviewing this article (December 2020); therefore, while no further formal interviews were conducted beyond the eight-week period, the author has intimate knowledge of the circumstances under which these families live.

Due to the limited nature of the research (focusing only on Abu Dhabi), the author does not wish to portray that the experiences discussed here are representative of all Syrians, or even all vulnerable Syrians, in the UAE. This sole focus limits this research to be only an explorative survey into the lived experience of the families interviewed and does not represent the experience of other communities in the UAE. However, from the author’s experience as part of country-wide discussions on education of vulnerable communities in the UAE, the challenges discussed in this study (access to education and healthcare), are also faced by many other vulnerable Syrians in the UAE.

The interviews sought to understand the lived experience of the families in Abu Dhabi, with a particular focus on their economic status. It explored the trajectory that had brought these families to Abu Dhabi and how they lived, what sacrifices they made in order to survive, and how they manoeuvered the very complex UAE system. The families were questioned about their lives in Syria before the crisis to gain an understating of their social status and reasons for leaving Syria and coming to the UAE. The main part of the interview consisted of questions around their lives in the UAE, their economic challenges and how this impacted their daily existence. It sought to understand how they live (and survive) in Abu Dhabi and what sacrifices they need to make in order to survive. The families were questioned about the education experience of the children and the circumstances that compelled them to seek support from the education programme. Finally, they were asked about their future intentions, specifically their plans to remain in Abu Dhabi.

Because of the vulnerability of the families interviewed, caution was taken not to reproduce any identifying markers, so that the privacy and security of the families are respected. From the time of the interviews until the time of review, the programme existed unofficially and informally, with no social media or public presence. Therefore, the author’s discretion was necessary to protect the families and the volunteers working on the project.

Syrians in Abu Dhabi: Navigating Life in a Complex Environment

The rationale for the recent arrival of Syrians in the UAE can be conceptualized through the push and pull factors developed by Kunz (1973). The reasons that
Syrians left their homes (push factors) are obvious. The violence, destruction of property, and loss of livelihoods in Syria (though individual experiences differ), and the lack of safety inside Syria provide the rationale for most to leave. The factors that drew them to the UAE differ slightly from the pull factors attributed to Syrian refugees in other locations in the Middle East, i.e. proximity of Syria. The arrival of the majority of Syrians in the UAE is primarily attributed to social and familial networks. While the geographic proximity as well as cultural and linguistic similarities between Syria and UAE are important pull factors, the presence of family members in the UAE, and through them a familiarity with the country, proved to be the most significant factor. The difficulty of obtaining a visa for the UAE had made it prohibitive for Syrians that did not have an established familiar link. The Syrian community in the UAE long predates the crisis, and the conflict in Syria brought dependents of those already established to the UAE. Were it not for the crisis, this new group of Syrians might not otherwise have resided in the UAE.

One family recounts a harrowing tale of their arrival in the UAE.

I have been in the UAE for 20 years, and my wife and children arrived in 2012 from Daraa. My wife went to Jordan with our three sons soon after the war started in 2011. with our three boys. My youngest son was already very sick when they left Syria and had deteriorated when they arrived in Jordan. His heart stopped several times during his stay in the hospital in Jordan and he soon died. My wife spent one month at his bedside while people in the camp looked after the older boys. After my son died, my wife and the boys went back to Syria to get passports. They lived on the streets for weeks as the house that we built in Daraa was destroyed. When she got their passports, she tried to go back to Jordan legally, but the borders were closed, so was smuggled into the country and went back to Zaatari. From there I then got visas for the family to come to the UAE. I have lost everything in Syria (Anonymous informant #3).

Another family describes their departure from Syria as a result of the war.

I have been in the UAE for 30 years and my wife arrived in 2013 because of the war. We are from Daraa. We had a big house, but it has been destroyed slowly over time. My wife moved several times in Deraa to escape the bombing. Several times she ran with the baby in her arms. I last visited Syria in 2012 and was meant to stay for forty days but came back after four days when I realised how bad the situation was. I decided that I could not allow my family to remain, so I returned to the UAE to get visas for them. I had to wait almost a year, as I had to save money for the visas and the flights (it costs US$450 for each visa). Because my boss needed me, he agreed to help with the visas. My wife and children took 3 days to cross to Amman and then flew to the UAE (Anonymous informant #9).

As with other migrant communities, there is a large socio-economic range among Syrians in the UAE, from highly skilled professionals to lower skilled workers. Because of restrictions in the UAE’s migration system, only individuals working in high skilled jobs, with a high salary in the private or public sector, could have
their dependents (wives, children and sometimes parents) in the UAE. Those with lower skills and lower salaries tended to have their families at home and sent monthly remittances.

This practice of family separation in the UAE is dictated by two mechanisms. Firstly, there is a minimum wage required to sponsor family members. UAE regulations stipulate that individuals working in private and public sector should have a monthly salary of US$1,100 or US$820 plus accommodation in order to sponsor family members (TAMM 2019). Secondly, the cost of living in the UAE had traditionally prohibited lower salaried migrants from bringing their families to the UAE, especially those from countries where there is free or inexpensive access to education and healthcare, both of which are costly in the UAE.

Apart from the cost of living, relocating dependants to the UAE is expensive-costly and can be complicated. The ability to sponsor family members is dependent on documentation from the individual’s sponsor stating the monthly salary. Visa applications also incur a cost. In theory, the employer should pay this, and this is often the case with highly skilled migrants in professional jobs and individuals working in the public sector. However, for some in the private sector, the worker can incur these costs both for themselves (it is often taken in monthly instalments from their salary) and for their dependants. Thus, for lower skilled and salaried Syrians, even if their salary matched the allocated threshold, there was no benefit in having family members in the UAE because of the high cost of living. Interviews with the families revealed that many of the wives and children of the male workers had only arrived post-2011. Interviews conducted with Syrian families also revealed that male workers often earned less than the required wage for sponsoring their families, or were unemployed, yet their families were able, even initially upon arrival to the UAE, to be sponsored.

It is uncertain whether family reunification had taken place due to the UAE authorities’ leniency toward Syrian family reunification, not enforcing the minimum wage requirements, or whether employers had been accommodating to their Syrian employees, providing documentation stating that their wages aligned with the legal requirements. Certainly, in cases where the males were unemployed, yet had a visa through sponsorship by a company (often through a family member or friend), they would obtain the appropriate documentation to be allowed to sponsor family members.

My wife arrived in the UAE in 2011 and we were without visas for 6 years. We have recently got visas as my brother has a small company and sponsors me, and then I sponsor the family. I am unemployed, but at least we are legal. (Anonymous informant #1).

The families interviewed were all struggling to survive and navigate life in Abu Dhabi. They all lived in very modest accommodation, with minimal personal belongings, reflecting their financial constraints. In some cases, more than one family unit lived in the same apartment, with one nuclear family to a room. Many of the families lived far from the centre of the city, where rent was much less
The families that lived closer to the centre of the city lived in much older, and often run-down, buildings.

Things are very bad for us here. My husband earns 4000AED/month (US$1,100/month) working in a restaurant. He suffers from eczema and has no health insurance. Our rent is 3,500AED/month (US$950/month), and we owe money (1000AED/US$270) to the landlord. Because we cannot pay this, the landlord has threatened to cut off the electricity. This has happened in the past and we had no electricity for two weeks, until I was able to borrow money to pay. We get calls every day about the money that we owe, and the landlord asks us every morning to leave (Anonymous informant #3)

In general, most earned barely enough to cover rent, and many were in arrears to landlords, and had other significant debt.

We have moved eight times in the past seven years because we could not pay our rent. My husband has been to court three times because the landlords filed cases for non-payment. But we have not been able to pay the outstanding amounts. Two months ago, my husband borrowed money from his friends to pay the full amount of outstanding rent. My husband works illegally and so we don’t have residence visas. (Anonymous informant #5)

However, a respondent mentioned that landlords had been more accommodating because there was plenty of accommodation available on the market, and they would rather wait for the rent to be paid than to risk an empty property for an undetermined period.

In general, among the families interviewed, the male heads of household worked in low salaried jobs and were educated to high school level. Interestingly, those interviewees who had post-secondary education had found it more difficult to find employment. The belief was that the situation was getting more difficult for Syrians in the UAE, with employers unwilling to hire Syrians, and when they did, the salaries offered were lower than it had been in the past for equivalent jobs. One university educated interviewee recounts that he believed that employers were taking advantage of the desperate situation that Syrians faced in the UAE.

I have a university degree in accounting from Jordan. I was an operations manager for a local company for most of my career. I have now been unemployed for nine months. I resigned from my job and after a few months my company called me back to do the same job, but offered a lower salary. I was offered US$1,360 for the job I had previously been paid US$3,200 to do. (Anonymous informant #1).

One side effect of being employed in low-skilled jobs was the difficulty in dependents remaining legal. In many cases, because the cost of dependent visas was passed on to the worker, wives and children often remained without visas for multiple years. From the interviews, two scenarios were evident. Firstly, the families arrived on tourist visas and never received resident visas, i.e. they were never sponsored by their working male relative. Second, they initially had resident visas,
and these were not renewed upon expiry, due either to the cost, or the male breadwinner becoming unemployed.

Life in the UAE for individuals who are irregular is highly problematic. Without a valid residence visa, individuals have no access to healthcare. In the UAE, healthcare is not free; instead, it is tied to an insurance system and linked to residence visas. In theory, the employer should pay for the medical insurance of the employee and his/her dependents. However, in practice, as with residence visas for many lower skilled workers, this cost is passed on to the employee, and again costs are prohibitive for low-salaried workers. The most basic insurance annually costs SUS270, for males, children and non-married female adult dependents, and SUS680 for married females.

Families developed negative coping strategies to deal with the inability to access affordable healthcare. Interviewees explained that they would self-diagnose using the internet instead of visiting a doctor.

My three-year old daughter spilt hot tea and was burned badly. Because we had no insurance, we did not take her to the doctor but treated her at home. She now has a big scar and is emotionally affected. (Anonymous informant #3)

Two of the Syrian women interviewed who have had babies while they had been irregular recounted negative coping strategies. Both women went to the accident and emergency (A&E) when in labour to deliver, forgoing pre- and postnatal care. Another informant mentioned that she had travelled Sharjah (one of the Northern Emirates), as paperwork (i.e. Emirates ID) was not required there, contrary to the case in Abu Dhabi and the cost was also significantly less.

Another impact of being irregular is the lack of access to formal education. It is not possible for children to attend school without a valid residence visa. Schools require all students to have valid passports, Emirates ID and residence visas (and the parents a rental agreement from the municipality) in order to enrol. This requirement has meant that many Syrian children have not been able to enrol in schools. In interviews, the issue of education was one that emerged as a concern for most parents. All the families interviewed had children who had missed school at some point in the past, often for multiple years, and in some cases, the children had never attended formal school.

I arrived in Abu Dhabi with my sister-law and our children in 2016 from Syria. None of the children have been to school since we arrived here for financial reasons, though we have visas. My daughter and niece finished grade 1 in Syria, and my two older sons left Syria after grade 6, the youngest was not school aged when we left Syria. The older boys are now 17 and 18. Their father is desperate all the children to attend school and finish their education especially the two older boys. My husband says that he is willing to pay some of their fees if a school would accept them. (Anonymous informant #4)

In some cases, students had begun school and had to drop out because of school fees not being paid. According to the Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) regulations, if a family runs into arrears of school fees for an academic
year, exam results could be withheld, and children prevented from re-registering until the payment is made. The school typically informs ADEK and a block is placed on the student, also preventing them from registering in another school. This block has become highly problematic for many of the families interviewed, and a reason that children were unable to attend school.

My children attended a school owned by my boss. He agreed that my children would get free places in the school because of my job. The management of the school recently changed, and the new administration demanded that I pay school fees for the previous three years for my three children. This amounted to 64,000AED (US$17,400). Because of the fees owed, there is a block from ADEK on my children attending school (Anonymous informant #2).

Issues with education go beyond the possession of valid visas. Apart from not having valid residence visas, the other main reason that children were unable to attend school was cost. In the UAE, education is not free for non-Emiratis. Public schools, which in the past educated Emirati and non-Emirati children free of charge, now incurs a cost for the children of migrant workers. This means that the majority of expatriate children attend private schools, and while there is a range of schools with varying fee structures, the costs are still significant. With limited financial resources, families interviewed were unable to cover the cost of school fees.

In cases where the children were unable to attend school, either for financial or for legal reasons, among the families interviewed, different coping strategies presented. In some families, one parent would assume responsibility of educating children at home.

My children (ranging from 11 to 5 years) have never been to school as we had no visas for 8 years. We now have visas because of the amnesty (war torn visa) but the older children have no school records so we could not get them into school. I teach the children Arabic at home, and my brother-in-law who speaks good English helps the children with English. (Anonymous informant #7).

The children from another family interviewed, who had been out of school for two years, had been home-schooled by the mother. When they were able to return to school, they were placed in the appropriate grade for their age. Another family, who had for many years been irregular, paid for and ‘enrolled’ the two older children into school for a year. Because of a lack of documentation, the children were considered ‘observers’ and not allowed to take exams, and thus received no school reports, no recognition for the year, and were not allowed to attend classes when school inspectors would visit the school.

My three older children attended school for one year as ‘listeners’ and they did not do exams or get school reports. Whenever there was a visit from the ministry, the children would have to leave the school, but we paid the school fees for this year. (Anonymous informant #5)
Families also mentioned that in the past, charity organizations provided some assistance for school fees. The Emirates Red Crescent, the Khalifa Fund and the Zakat Fund had, in the past, supported families to pay school fees. However, families had not been able to access any funding from these organizations recently. One interviewee commented about the lack of transparency in the application period for the Zakat fund, and another commented that the amount given was insufficient.

My older two boys attend a government school (for those who are able to gain admission on the quota system, it is not free and costs 6000AED/US$1,600 per year). Because they missed years of school because of the war in Syria they are both two grades below where they should be for their age. In the past, the fees had been paid by the Emirates Red Crescent and Khalifa Fund, which has now stopped giving grants for school fees. The Emirates Red Crescent (ERC) promised to pay fees for this year, but so far have not. The ERC sometimes paid the full amount for one child in the past, but now they only pay 3000AED. For this school year, we have not paid, and the school has sent several warnings. (Anonymous informant #3)

One family explained how his children’s teachers supported them remaining in school.

We had not been able to pay the school fees for our older children and the school asked them to leave. They were out of school for two months. The students and teachers protested because they were such good students and well-liked by everyone and so they were allowed back to school. (Anonymous informant #9).

The general mood among the families was one of desolation. One interviewee expressed that he felt trapped in Abu Dhabi, not being to earn enough to cover all his expenses despite working for 12 to 14 hours a day. He was particularly concerned about not being able to afford medical insurance for his family, constantly hoping that none of his children fell ill. He also worried about the future for his children, who had been doing very well at school, and hopes they can study at a university outside the UAE, in Europe or North America, and have the opportunity for a good future.

I often pinch myself that this is my reality. I want this to be a dream. My family had a good life in Syria, with a big house and the money that I sent meant that my family lived well there. This has become a nightmare for me. I decided not to take the risk to take my family to Europe via the sea. Now that Turkey is difficult to access because of the visa regulations for Syrians and my deteriorating situation in the UAE, I regret not taking the risk to make it to Europe like my siblings. The children of my brothers in Europe attend school for free and have free healthcare. This is not available for us here. (Anonymous informant #9).

While they all agreed that they were happy to live safely in the UAE and would rather stay, they all expressed that if their situation did not improve, particularly access to education for their children, they would contemplate return to Syria,
despite the lack of safety. Yet, when questioned about return to Syria, the men were more reluctant for fear of being recruited into the military. Many had family members who had been imprisoned, kidnapped or disappeared.

I cannot go back to Syria. I am scared. Three of my female relatives have been captured/detained by the military; one has been released and two are still held. My brother and father and had also been held but were released. (Anonymous informant #7)

However, they were very aware that their situation in Abu Dhabi was unsustainable in the long run, because of their difficult financial circumstances, yet felt they had very few options but to stay despite the difficult situation.

I am not sure if I want to stay in the UAE, but there are few options. My husband is Palestinian from Gaza. I cannot go to Palestine because I am Syrian, but my husband and children can go because they have Palestinian passports. Palestinians are not welcomed in Lebanon and Turkey is too expensive. But in the UAE, the children cannot go to school. But we have no choice but to stay here. (Anonymous informant #5)

The lack of agency among the families interviewed was obvious. The feelings of entrapment in their situation and lack of options made them feel out of control of their lives. In most cases, their situations seemed solvable—a (better) job, a removal of an education block so that their children could attend school, free education and healthcare, yet these solutions seemed out of reach for the families interviewed. They expressed that their situation had not always been as dire, and if it had not been for the war in Syria, their lives would be different (better). Whether they would be in Syria, or in a different position in the UAE. Their existence now bears no resemblance to what it could have been.

Conclusion

The UAE’s actions with regard to the Syrian refugee crisis parallels that of European countries (with the notable exception of Germany); support the international effort to assist Syrian refugees in the Middle East host countries bordering Syria, but welcome few within their borders; the UAE’s grand compromise. Yet, despite this the numbers of Syrians in the UAE doubled after 2011 due to the arrival of the family members of Syrians already resident. The UAE, a non-signature of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, has adopted a quasi-asylum policy, accepting Syrians within its borders in a way that aligned within its existing migration framework.

This means that Syrians, despite their vulnerability, are treated no differently to any other migrant group. Even the 2018 visa amnesty is not something out of the ordinary, as there had been numerous visa amnesties in the past, allowing individuals who were irregular to regularize their status. Yet, the ‘visas for individuals from war torn countries’ issued along with the 2018 amnesty indicates an
acknowledgment that Syrians, and other individuals feeling conflict, required additional support.

Yet, the policy of placing Syrians within the same category as other migrant workers where they are not afforded similar protection as Syrian refugees in other refugee-hosting (but also non-signature) countries, contributes to their vulnerability and the precariousness of their lives. While there has been community effort throughout the UAE to address the particular needs of these vulnerable populations, only federal and emirate government actions can provide the protection that would be required for this vulnerable group.

With an educated and skilled, yet small indigenous population, the UAE’s labour needs, unlike those in Europe and North America, have capacity to accommodate a diverse range of skills and levels of education. The Syrian population with its large socio-economic and education range easily aligns with this requirement, making it easy to integrate Syrians into the UAE’s economy. The UAE has the capacity to maintain the use of its migration framework, where migrants are employed, and still provide the protection required by the Refugee Convention.

Acknowledgement
This paper was written between March and June 2019 and reviewed in December 2020.

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