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"BUT YOU DO NOT 'LOOK' SYRIAN?" EXPERIENCES OF SYRIANS IN URBAN AREAS OF SWEDEN

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“But you do not 'look' Syrian?” Experiences of Syrians in urban areas of Sweden

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Abstract

This paper discusses the lived experience of Syrians who face discrimination and prejudice while integrating into urban society in the Swedish cities of Malmö and Gothenburg. Based on semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation and participant observation carried out between 2016 and 2020 , the author reflects on and analyses the different personal everyday encounters experienced by Syrians while integrating into the urban environments of these two cities. As little was generally known among the host population about Syria as a country or society prior to the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, the study shows that general assumptions were made about Syrians based on orientalism, media narratives and other forms of stereotypical representations of Arab peoples. This led to misunderstanding and surprises during personal encounters between Syrian and Swedish people. This working paper describes and explores how these everyday encounters are experienced by Syrians. It will provide an analysis of encounters between Syrians and Swedish society and the different coping mechanisms and strategies that Syrians use to mitigate prejudice and discriminatory attitudes towards them, which are not openly recognised nor identified as prejudiced perceptions of the Syrian migrant in Sweden.

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1. Introduction

Migration is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that has played a significant role in shaping the demographics of Sweden. Historically, Sweden has been a country of emigration, with large numbers of people leaving to seek better economic opportunities in other parts of Europe and North America. However, in recent decades, Sweden has become a country of immigration, which has brought both opportunities and challenges for Sweden, and which has also had a significant impact on the country's economy, culture, and society. The latest wave of immigrants come from war-stricken countries such as Afghanistan and Syria.

In May 2022, a Syrian family arrived in Sweden from Beirut and landed eventually at Skurup airport near the Swedish city of Malmö. They had left the southern Syrian city of Dera'a in 2012 to flee the war. In Lebanon, the family was selected in 2021 to become so-called quota refugees, or resettlement refugees,[2] to be sent to Sweden through a United Nations programme. The municipality that was supposed to receive them and pick them up from the airport was the southern Swedish village of Staffanstorp. But the Syrian family waited in vain for their airport pick-up until the Swedish migration agency representative eventually found an alternative, which was then arranged (Galinon & Landelius, 2022; The Local, 2022).

The family never arrived at their initial destination, Staffanstorp. This municipality had made an independent decision to no longer receive quota refugees since they c required a lot of resources, did not speak any other language or were often illiterate, thereby putting additional pressure on the municipality's budget. Therefore, they chose to introduce a total stop on quota refugees and instead directed resources to receiving refugees from Ukraine (The Local, 2022). Six months later, most members of the Syrian family, whose oldest son had already studied microbiology back in Lebanon, have mastered the Swedish language and intend to build their future in Sweden (Landelius, 2023). A national investigation is ongoing into the event as a case of discrimination and racism. It is an example of how some Syrian migrants can be perceived in Sweden; as backwards, often illiterate, uncultured, and difficult to integrate into Swedish society due to major differences in norms and values. These are the prejudices and stereotypes that Syrians face every day in Sweden.

This working paper intends to present ongoing research on how Syrians in Sweden, particularly in urban areas, are establishing new lives in Swedish society and how they face stereotypical

[2] *Resettlement refugees are registered as refugees by the UNHCR but cannot be offered a permanent solution in the country they are currently in and are therefore offered resettlement in a third country.*

attitudes in their everyday encounters. According to Eurostat statistics, in 2014, among all the countries of Europe, Germany granted protection to the most Syrian refugees (25,735), followed by Sweden (16,785), the Netherlands (5,485) and Denmark (4,000) (Eurostat, 2022). These numbers are increasing, and as of 31 December, 2021 more than 196,000 individuals born in Syria lived in Sweden, which makes Syrians the largest foreign-born group in Sweden, followed closely by people born in Iraq (146.000) and Finland (136.000) (*Eurostat*, 2022; Rabo et al., 2021).

Many Syrians in Sweden have faced challenges adjusting to life in a new country. These include the language barrier and difficulties in finding employment. The Swedish government and non-governmental organizations provided support and resources to help Syrian refugees integrate into Swedish society. Additionally, Syrians in Sweden have also faced social and political challenges, such as xenophobia and racism. Despite these societal challenges, many Syrians have been able to build new lives and become active members of their communities. Overall, Syrians in Sweden represent a diverse group of individuals with varying backgrounds, experiences, and reasons for coming to Sweden. Yet, in their everyday lives Syrians need to still navigate cultural stereotypes and discrimination.

In 2021, Rabo et al. investigated the integration process from both Swedish and Syrian perspectives and found that both sides erect boundaries, which stereotypes are reproduced and perpetuated.

> *The discourse utilized by the Swedish state in multiple parliamentary inquiry reports and migrant integration documents portrays honour crimes as specific to 'patriarchal' and 'collectivist' cultures, which stands in stark contrast to the states' depiction of Swedish values of 'gender equality' and 'individualism'. And, as evidenced by interviews with Syrian migrants, we find that they also use stereotyping to portray Swedish culture as against family integrity and overly liberal* (Rabo et al., 2021:1293).

In this working paper, two cases of integration into urban environments, in Malmö and Gothenburg, are presented to explore how commonplace stereotyping is experienced from a Syrian migrant perspective and to show how Syrians navigate these interactions.

2. Stereotyping between Swedes and Syrians in Sweden

This study focuses on the question of how, and in which situations, Syrians experience prejudice and discrimination in their everyday encounters with Swedish social institutions and non-migrant Swedes. What strategies do Syrians implement to cope and mitigate the impact that prejudices about Syrians has on their lives?

During the period between 2010 and 2017, the Syrian-born population became the largest immigrant group in Sweden, surpassing the Finnish-born population, and thereby playing a key role in changing the demographics of the country (Aradhya & Mussino, 2020; Rabo et al., 2021). In the first few years of their arrival, navigating the administrative and social landscape was not an easy task, but many Syrians showed a high capacity for resilience and adaptation. However, shortcomings have also been documented, particularly in terms of entering the labour market and language acquisition (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2020; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019). By the early 2000s, research had already found that key actors holding gatekeeper positions in the Swedish labour market discriminated against non-European migrants (Rydgren, 2004). This study focuses on Syrians who have mastered the Swedish language and who are in an advanced stage of integration into Swedish society. However, despite these efforts to connect to Swedish society, they face subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination that demonstrate that Swedish "natives" often have little knowledge about Syrians and the diversity of their backgrounds. Rabo *et al* (2021) relate to this subtle differentiation when they investigated forms of "boundary making," whereby both migrant and state narratives produce a perception of difference between groups (Rabo et al., 2021). This type of differentiation can lead to overt or direct (classical) and covert or subtle (modern) prejudice and racism (Akrami et al., 2000).

Rabo et al. (2021) observed that the language used by the Swedish state and Syrian migrants themselves led to the construction of differences between "native" Swedes and Syrians (Rabo et al., 2021). This boundary making works both ways, in that both native-Swedes and Syrians will demarcate their identity and distinct stereotypical characteristics against the "Other" (Rabo et al., 2021). Rabo et al. (2021) found that stereotyping takes place in both groups, whereby native-Swedes emphasize the collectivist nature of non-European cultures and Syrians perceive Swedish society as individualistic and dominated by state power.

As with the two-way process of stereotyping, integration can also be considered as a two-way process. Klarenbeek (2021) distinguishes between 1) insiders being affected by the integration of outsiders, 2) insiders influencing the integration of outsiders and 3) insiders and outsiders

integrating with each other. Integration as a practical and theoretical concept is becoming increasingly problematic, and perceiving it as a two-way process is a more accurate analytical approach towards understanding how migrants, in this case Syrians, settle and adjust in a new country and face up to the challenges of prejudice, racial exclusion and unconscious bias (Hellgren, 2015). Rabo et al (2021) have observed that the use of culturalist and dichotomic language by Swedish public institutions creates opposing social categories and stereotypes. This in turn is reflected in the everyday experiences of Syrians. Klarenbeek (2021) has identified ways to deal with implicit bias and engender boundary change by altering the way in which people categorize each other, behave towards each other and self-identify and conceptualize in opposition to the Other.

3. Research Methodology

This paper employs a case study method as an exploratory and explanatory approach to investigating integration and encounters between Syrians and Swedes within an urban context. A case study can be defined as a detailed examination of a single example of phenomena and is often critiqued for its weak theoretical value, reliability and validity. Flyvbjerg (2006), however, has clearly indicated that predictive theory in the social sciences does not exist and conventional wisdom about case study research is therefore wrong and misleading. The case study forms an important research task and is a sufficient method for social science in so far as it contributes to the cumulative development of knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this case, the case study, as a qualitative research method, is useful not only to provide empirical insight into daily encounters between Syrians and Swedish institutions and people in certain urban areas of Sweden, but it also enables us to place these in a social and geographical context in which the urban environment is a main feature, as opposed to consideration of Syrian migrants that live in the rural parts of Sweden. The author has a long experience of conducting research on and in Syria, and with Syrians. For this paper material has been used that was collected within the framework of the Refugee Migration and Cities: Social Institutions, Political Governance and Integration in Jordan, Turkey and Sweden (SIPGI) research environment led by Gothenburg University,[3] as well as from previous data collected through informal talks, interviews,

[3] The SIPGI – Refugee Migration and Cities: Social Institutions, Political Governance and Integration in Jordan, Turkey and Sweden research environment aims to produce new knowledge about the political and social possibilities and limitations for urban integration in large cities in Sweden, Turkey and Jordan. The programme is supported by the Swedish Research Council, project number 2018-03700_VR

participant observation and engagement with the Syrian communities in both Malmö and Gothenburg.

3.1. Case study sites

Malmö

In 2015, many Syrians took the route over the Öresund bridge that connects the Danish capital Copenhagen with the southern Swedish city of Malmö. Even before the arrival of Syrian war refugees in 2012, Arabs were the largest immigrant minority in Sweden, with approximately 159,400 members (Statistics Sweden, 2015). Along with other cities, the city of Malmö already had a highly concentrated Arab population, and hence many Syrians preferred to stay in this region after they received residence permits. Malmö is the third largest city in Sweden and is located in the southernmost province of Skåne. It is known for its diverse population and being very multilingual. It has a history of immigration, particularly from the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans, which has led to a diverse and multicultural society. The city has faced challenges related to integration and housing, but has also benefited from the contributions of immigrants in various fields, including the economy and culture. Malmö has undergone significant changes over the past decades, with a focus on urban development and sustainability, and it is now a major center for innovation and creativity. In 2020, the city had around 100,000 foreign-born residents, which is about 30% of the total population which gives an idea of the diversity of the city (SCB, 2020).

Gothenburg

Gothenburg,the second largest city in Sweden, is located on the west coast of the country. It is known for its port and shipbuilding industry, as well as its vibrant cultural scene. The city is also a popular destination for students, not only from Sweden but also internationally. Gothenburg has a diverse population, with a significant number of people from other countries, particularly from the Middle East and Africa. This has led to a rich cultural mix and a distinctive blend of traditional and modern influences, with 34% of the city's population born outside of Sweden or with at least one parent born abroad (OECD, 2018). The city has also faced challenges related to integration and housing, but it has also benefited from the contributions of migrants in various areas, including the economy and culture. Gothenburg is also a major center for business and innovation in the fields of technology and engineering.

3.2. Interviews and photo elicitation

Participant observation was conducted in both study sites, Malmö from 2015, and Gothenburg from 2020. The study is further informed by semi-structured interviews, which took place in Malmö in 2016 and Gothenburg in 2020 and 2023. Interviews took place in Arabic and Swedish, and respondents' names were anonymized, with quoted pseudonyms used. Respondents were selected using so-called snowball sampling, based on referral and networking by the interviewees (Parker et al., 2019). The study focused mainly on Syrian-born respondents who have fled to Sweden after 2011. One second-generation Syrian female, who was born before 2011 in Sweden with Syrian-born parents, was also interviewed. Conducted within the framework of a qualitative research approach, the main purpose of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experience of Syrians and the discrimination and unconscious bias encountered in these two Swedish cities, rather than to generalize or replicate these findings in other urban contexts.

Interview data for the Gothenburg case derive from three field visits to the city in 2020 and in 2023. A respondent group of 15 Syrians in Gothenburg were involved in participatory photography over the course of the summer of 2020. From this group, semi-structured photo elicitation interviews (PEI) were conducted (Harper, 2002), followed up by in-depth interviews in 2020 and 2023. The PEI was structured around photographs taken by the respondents themselves during their everyday activities and encounters in the participatory exercise. Photo-elicitation is particularly useful as a tool for engagement and reflection during interviews about everyday encounters, providing the interlocutor with cues to begin their stories and to provide additional context,reminding them of their feelings in the moment of encounter (Copes et al., 2018; Hopkins & Wort, 2020; Mott et al., 2020).

Interview data for the Malmö case, have been partially derived from 12 interviews that the author conducted as Senior Researcher at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES), Lund University, Sweden, in 2016, for a collaborative pilot study entitled "Syrians in the Öresund" ,, while coordinating a project on "Trajectories of the Syrian Diaspora in Europe." [4]

[4] For the 2016 study, I conducted 12 semi-structured open-ended interviews, of which 7 were jointly conducted with dr. D. Abdelhady of the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES). This project was conducted within the framework of the Strategic Research Area, The Middle East in the Contemporary World (MECW) at Lund University.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic and/or Swedish and were audio-recorded and translated/transcribed into English. Analysis of interview data, photographic and visual data and fieldnotes took place using nVivo software to facilitate inductive coding and to build an analytical case study for each city. From this exercise, specific patterns started to emerge concerning the lived experiences of personal encounters in Swedish society. The study has followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council, all respondents have been anonymized in this paper and no names or other specific personal details have been recorded in the reporting of results.

4. Findings and Discussion

Below are the study findings and discussions that focused on the daily encounters of Syrians after settling in the urban environments of two middle-sized Swedish cities. First, the arrival of Syrians in Swedish urban environments is discussed. Second, a deliberation about establishing social relations and friendships post arrival and settlement in Sweden is considered, followed by a final section that highlights our findings of how Syrians experience prejudice in their daily encounters and the coping mechanisms that follow on from this.

4.1. Syrians in urban environments in Sweden

This paper looks at two cases of Swedish urban environments that have provided living space for Syrians who fled the war in Syria that emerged after a peaceful uprising in 2011 against the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad. The city of Malmö is located in the south of Sweden, just opposite the Danish capital Copenhagen. The city is characterized as post-industrial. It had already been a center for a sizable Arab-speaking community, mainly consisting of Lebanese, Iraqi and Palestinian immigrants and their second-generation descendants, who started to arrive and settle in the city in the 1980s.

The first Syrians fleeing the war in Syria started to arrive in Malmö and its nearby neighbouring town of Lund in 2012; Both places gradually experienced a slow growth in the number of arriving Syrians until there was a major push in the summer of 2015 (Wessels, 2020). In September 2014, having briefly visited the northwestern border area inside Syria, the author observed an increasing stream of Syrians fleeing into Turkey from the border crossings of Bab al Hawa and Bab al Salameh. It would only be a matter of time before these people would travel further into Europe. One of the major factors for the sudden arrival of larger groups of Syrians in Sweden in 2015 was related to the increased level of violence and aerial

bombardments inside Syria, not only by the Syrian regime itself, but also arising from Russia and the international coalition bombing areas under ISIS-control. Syria became a geographically divided country, controlled by either opposition groups linked to the secular opposition government jihadi militias and ISIS, or the Assad regime. The patchwork of warring factions, personal threats by ISIS or jihadi militias, conscription to the army by the Assad regime, along withe additional threats by the regime's security services, also motivated Syrians in all areas to flee abroad (Borselli & van Meijl, 2021). A year later, a lot more Syrian refugees were to be expected in Europe, not only because of the increased level of aerial bombardment that commenced in September 2015, but also as an indirect consequence of the American deal to lift sanctions in Iran, which gave a financial boost to Iran to further fund their intervention in Syria, while Russia also entered the war in that same year in support of the Assad regime (Wessels, 2015). Apart from safety concerns, economic prospects and opportunities to build a good life wereseverely curtailed for many Syrians, who faced a life of extreme poverty if they were to remain in the country.

> *Many were planning to enhance their economic position, to further their education, or to undertake a certain career. The conflict thwarted these aspirations, causing a major disruption in the life trajectories Syrians envisaged for themselves and their families. Possibilities of employment became scarce, students were forced to drop out of universities, and parents could not safeguard children's needs and education. Migrating thus acquired additional instrumental values that went beyond the need to find safety, because it also implied rethinking those life trajectories interrupted by the war* (Borselli & van Meijl, 2021: 585).

One of the main arrival spots in Sweden where Syrians landed in 2015 was the city of Malmö. It is located at one side of the Öresund Bridge connecting Sweden to Denmark, and therefore the central train station in Malmö became a major reception center for the first Syrian arrivals. From there, Syrians would be sent to the Migration Agency or other parts of Sweden to start the asylum process. The Migration Agency in Malmö at the time registered around 900 asylum applications a day, which was unprecedented since the Balkan war (Braw, 2015). Having spent months in the asylum centers, Syrians were sent to other places to settle, offered accommodation and started programs for integration (Borselli & van Meijl, 2021). A major part returned or remained in Malmö, enriching the already existing Arab language community in the city. Syrians settled throughout the city, with a focus on neighbourhoods in the south such as Rosengård and Sofielund. A fast-growing network of Syrian-owned sweet shops,

restaurants and gold shops started to emerge in the city centre of Malmö, in particular in and around the area of Möllan, or Möllevången. The area is known for its multicultural atmosphere, with a mix of residents from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Möllan has lively street markets, cafes, bars, and restaurants that reflect the area's diverse population. The main square, Möllevångstorget, hosts a weekly farmers' market and is a popular meeting place for locals and visitors alike. Möllan is also known for its active arts and music scene. The neighborhood has several music venues, art galleries, and theaters, making it a hub for Malmö's cultural activities. While Möllan has a reputation as a trendy and bohemian area, it also faces social challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and crime. However, community initiatives and solidarity activism have played an important role in addressing these issues and creating a more inclusive and welcoming neighbourhood for everyone (Hansen, 2019).

Gothenburg was another major point for Syrians to settle. In neighbourhoods such as Angered, and to some extent Hisingen, the Arabic-speaking immigrant community is relatively large. Many Syrian families settled in these neighbourhoods. However, some prefer to be either closer to work and/or study locations in the city, and single Syrians and students prefer the city centre. A meeting point for a tight group of Syrians who knew each other from before the Syrian uprisings, was located in Majorna, in the city centre. Mozaik was an art café set up by a journalist and broadcaster from the Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk, near Damascus. A known figure among Syrian revolutionaries and anti-regime protesters from Damascus, the owner had a wide network of friends in Gothenburg and all over Sweden when he arrived. The experience of the uprisings and the demonstrations of the early days of the Syrian revolution created a bond between Syrians in Sweden that is very strong. One of our participants described this experience in the popular uprising as a defining watershed moment in his life: *"The demonstrations were a watershed moment for me. From inside it shaped something in me. I became an adult. I learned a lot and made a lot of friends. The beginning of the revolution was something amazing."*[5]

The owner of Mozaik decided to set up this art café in 2019 in order to make a living and to create a space that provided a comfortable and cozy middle eastern environment to enable people in Gothenburg to taste Middle Eastern food and enjoy Arabic music and hospitality. He rented this space from the local church and specifically chose Majorna because of its location and atmosphere. Majorna is a vibrant and diverse neighbourhood, located on the western side

[5] *Interview August 2020*

of Gothenburg, which attracts both locals and tourists. It is known for its bohemian atmosphere, with numerous cafes, restaurants, and vintage shops. The area has a mix of historic and modern architecture, with many buildings dating back to the early 20th century. The neighborhood has a strong sense of community, with many residents involved in local initiatives and events. There are also several cultural institutions in the area, such as the Röda Sten Konsthall, a contemporary art center housed in a former boiler house.

Young Syrians in particular prefer to settle in urban areas, such as Gothenburg and Malmö, not only because of the opportunities for higher education and work, but also to battle the challenge of loneliness, which has been a major social and personal challenge for Syrians arriving in Sweden who settle in small towns in the Swedish countryside. While expectations of freedom and a better, fairer organized society were high when Syrians first arrived in Sweden, building strong social relationships with non-migrant Swedes remains a struggle. Syrians repeatedly reported that Swedish society is "as cold as the weather.". It was easier to socially connect to Syrians, Arabs or other migrants than with Swedes who do not have a migrant background, and the opportunity to encounter other Syrians and migrants is higher in urban areas such as Gothenburg and Malmö.

4.2. Encounters, building friendships and social relationships

Having a network of friends or relatives from Syria in Sweden prior to arrival helped many of the research participants to build friendships during the settling-in phase. The common experience of flight and war, but also of going through a revolution in Syria and participating in anti-regime demonstrations prior to fleeing the country, created a strong rapport and bond between Syrians on arrival in Sweden. It was not only the newly arrived Syrians who forged a bond through their common experience of the Syrian revolution and war. They connected through activism with other Arabic-language speaking communities,mainly in the years directly following 2015 when anti-regime activism and street demonstrations were organized in the squares of Gothenburg and Malmö as a reaction to events back in Syria, particularly the sieges of Aleppo and Ghouta, which motivated groups of Syrians and Swedes (Wessels, 2020).

Second-generation Syrians in Sweden also felt a sense of solidarity with these newly arrived Syrians. Fatimah remembered that when the Syrian Uprising started, she hoped that this would give her the opportunity to finally go to Syria. Her father fled Syria in the 1980s, and her family name, and father's name, were blacklisted by the Assad regime, meaning that she never had

the opportunity to visit the country of her parents. She was born and raised in Sweden, but she felt as if she could become more Syrian by becoming more active in the revolution. She started to organize and be active in volunteering to help displaced Syrians and eventually became active in the demonstrations in Gothenburg against the sieges in Syria in 2016. She connected with the Syrian refugees who were forcibly displaced. She felt proud to be Syrian and hoped to find her identity. She explained:

> *I do not feel Swedish, although I grew up here, I speak the language fluently, and I have gone to school here. A part of me will never 'become' Swedish. In my activities with the newly arrived Syrian community here, I felt hope.* [6]

When she was publicly active in the demonstrations and writing in public about volunteering and the Syrian revolution, she also got both positive and negative reactions from other Syrians in Sweden. The positive reactions encouraged her and the more negative told her it was not her place to volunteer. She went to Lebanon to volunteer with Syrian refugees. She hid her Syrian identity at the Beirut airport when she showed her Swedish passport because her friends advised her not to say she was Syrian, but Egyptian. Through volunteering she said that she re-found her Syrian identity.

This all turned to disillusionment when she finally visited the opposition-controlled areas of Syria for the first time in 2019. Under the guidance of the Turkish authorities, a group of foreigners was able to visit the border area of 'Azaz. She visited the IDP camp, with its displaced people, destruction and checkpoints with FSA soldiers. She had idealised the FSA, as heroes of the revolution, but what she saw in Syria was, for her, anything but heroism. It was such a shock for her that she became conflicted and underwent an identity crisis. The new Syria was not what she thought it would be. It had been a dream.

Speaking the language of the host country enables migrants to connect to their Swedish neighbors, to establish social relations and to build friendships. Elderly Syrians who arrived in Sweden due to the Syrian war reported a sense of isolation,being not only unable to master the language but also feeling the lack of social connection with their neighbors in a more individualistic society than they had been used to back in Syria. Ahmad indicated that:

> *Sweden is not an open, social society: Normally people from the Mediterranean or the Middle East are very social people who talk to people, who talk a lot, who get to know*

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[6] *Interview, July 2020*

people, go out, go out at night, there is a connection. The connection between Swedish people is somehow less. That is the reason for some isolation and loneliness. I am lonely, I don't know the neighbor that lives in the same building, these are things I have difficulty understanding in Swedish society. [7]

Syrian food culture is a vital and important part of Syrian society and identity, with a strong focus on hospitality to strangers and guests. The presence of an already established Arab immigrant community in Malmö made it possible for Syrians to fit in and invest in commercial enterprises and buy particular Arab food items in the Middle Eastern supermarkets and vegetable stores for private uses. Arabic falafel and shawarma restaurants were already extremely popular in Malmö. Iraqi, Lebanese and Iranian restaurants were doing very well in this urban environment. The arrival of Syrians added an additional dimension to this already vibrant mix of Arabic and Middle Eastern food cultures. Syrian restaurants in the city center of Malmö provide space for Syrians and Swedish people with a non-migrant background to meet and interact. Indeed, many Syrian restaurants opened at the same time as the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015. One chain of restaurants developed in Malmö and has become very popular among Malmö-residents. TIt sells fast-food falafel and shawarma Arabi, as well as serving a la carte food and buffets in a larger restaurant. Most Syrian restaurants try to replicate Syrian culture and atmosphere by the names they choose, such as Yasmin al Sham, Shamiaat, Qamar al Sham, the decoration of the space with specific Syrian pillows and furniture, built-in fountains, posters depicting places such as the Roman Tetrapylon of Palmyra, the Waterwheels of Hama, The Big Mosque of Damascus and the Citadel of Aleppo. In Gothenburg, the presence of Syrian restaurants in the city center is less obvious, but spaces such as the Mozaik artcafe and the restaurant of Tannour in Angered are also places of interaction between Syrians and non-Syrians. However, Syrian restaurants in neighborhoods outside the city centers of Malmö and Gothenburg, such as in Rosengård or Angered, with a high number of migrants, have less non-migrant customers than restaurants located in the city centers.

Most of the participants in this study had acquired a sufficient command of the Swedish language to enable them to communicate well and conduct social conversation with non-migrant Swedes and Swedes with a migrant background who do not have Arabic as their native language. Despite the ability to connect and establish friendships through speaking Swedish, the participants indicated that in general they find it difficult to make friends with non-migrant

[7] *Interview, May 2016*

Swedes. Others said that they did not have non-migrant Swedish friends and mainly found friends among second generation migrant Swedes or others with an Arabic background. Some participants described having one or two good non-migrant Swedish friends, however the majority indicated that they mainly have international friends or friendships with Swedes with a migrant background. In particular, Syrians who studied at university mentioned that they had friends from all over the world. While others had friends via their work or study, some had built strong friendships with people with whom they shared a common experience during their time at the asylum center. Ziad had found most of his friends on Tinder. He explained this when he showed a photograph of his best friend, his girlfriend and another Swedish friend:

> *These are all Swedish women. I like women-friends more than men. I know all of them through Tinder. It is the best app to find friends and it's not all about sex, you know. I use it a lot to get to know people.*[8]

Fatimah became disillusioned with the Syrian Revolution and now studies psychology because she wants to understand more about identity and how people form this. She does not feel that she belongs to either Syrian or Swedish society, although she knows the latter best despite feeling excluded sometimes:

> *I am human. For me this feels difficult. I do not get too much abuse or anything, but I do feel discriminated against because I wear a hijab. I especially get remarks because Swedish people think I am Swedish. I have blue eyes and such and then I wear a headscarf. They ask why I wear that. I do not react to those remarks. I speak perfect Swedish, but I do not react, why should I do that?* [9]

Another Syrian female participant mentioned that she faced discrimination, or prejudice, about wearing the hijab from the Swedish feminists with whom she engaged during voluntary work. She wears a hijab at home with her parents, mainly out of respect for her father, but she sometimes chooses not to wear it when she is going out, and sometimes, when inside, she wears a looser version. This was not understood by the Swedish women she engaged with in her voluntary work. They asked her why she still wears the hijab when she should now be liberated from it, referring to the occasions when she chooses not to wear a headscarf.

> *I sometimes wear it, and I sometimes don't, that's my choice, but I feel that they are somehow not understanding how that works. They think I am oppressed because I choose*

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[8] *Interview, August 2020*

[9] *Interview, July 2020*

to wear it out of respect. I do not feel oppressed at all. There is no relationship for me between wearing a hijab and oppression. This is not what it is about.[10]

Apart from work and study, children's school activities and activities such as volunteering or sports provide other spaces of encounter with Swedish society and people. For example, playing football and volleyball provided Syrian students with opportunities to meet friends from different nationalities. Others meet Swedish people in the gym. Ziad described how he uses exercise to cope with his traumas and to challenge himself, as well as to make friends. He has a relatively fixed group of people he trains and conducts group exercises with who are all Swedes with a non-migrant background. Yet, despite seeing this group every week, he feels like an outsider:

I think it is my skin color. No matter how or why, but I feel outside of this group. They have their own little group. They smile and they are very nice but they do not take me in. But this exercise has also been my own individual outlet, so it is less important for me that I am not really included in their circle.[11]

These subtle feelings of everyday exclusions also express for Syrians a barrier that suggests that non-migrant Swedes do not want to interact on a deeper level with them. In some cases, exclusionary encounters are more direct and felt as discrimination and prejudice, as explained in the next section.

4.3. Racism and prejudice in everyday encounters and coping strategies

Ziad points to the sticker he found on the electric scooter he uses regularly to go to his work in Gothenburg. It says in Swedish "Svenska Liv Spelar Roll," which translates in English as Swedish Lives Matter.

This is a racist sticker," explains Ziad, *"I felt offended when I found it on one of the electric scooters in the city. I use them regularly. It says the same as White Lives Matter as opposed to Black Lives Matter, or even all lives matter, in any case it is a racist sticker. I am not surprised because I feel this is a country of white privilege and I get confronted with it every day.*[12]

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[10] *Interview, February 2023*

[11] *Interview, August 2020*

[12] *Ibid.*

The presence of these stickers in Gothenburg is explained by the increasing popularity with the Swedish electorate of rightwing anti-immigrant parties over the past 5 years. Enos (2022) found that the arrival of Syrian refugees has, since 2015, led to significant support for anti-immigrant politics at municipal level in Sweden, which she calls a "politicized ethno-racial shock that lead to increases in far-right support" (Enos, 2022). In the vicinity of central Gothenburg, for example, in the area of Mölndal, the far-right and anti-immigration Alternative for Sweden (AFS) party has increased in popularity since the elections in 2022. Their members have organized open demonstrations and harassed residents with a migrant background (Karlsson, 2022). The party wants to spread a message about returning migration for immigrants in Sweden.

When Klarenbeek argued for a two-way approach to integration, she distinguished several processes that happen when migrants arrive in a new society., Among other ideas, she suggested that insiders are affected by the integration of outsiders, i.e. the migrants, and that insiders and outsiders integrate together (Klarenbeek, 2021). However, outsiders face a plethora of different institutional encounters and difficulties, including the migration board, educational institutions, social institutions, and officials who interview and investigate them, as well as continuous angst about instability and not being able to settle because they have not yet received permanent residence. This is a process that insiders do not face. Insiders also face less exclusion, fewer feelings of difference, and fewer doubts and prejudices about levels of education and language ability. The participants in this study have indicated that they feel that they are viewed as a number when interacting with governmental institutions. In general, the experiences and encounters of Syrians with the offices of the Migration Board have not been overly positive, whether these are instances of prejudice, bureaucracy, slowness, lack of hospitality and being made to feel like a number rather than a person, or the suffocating experience of the asylum application investigation, which some highlighted as a traumatic experience. One participant explained that the migration board office in Gothenburg, where she has regularly interacted with Swedish migration officials over the course of eight years, has been the least friendly building she has ever visited:

> *...even the windows are weapon-proof, you do not get contact with people, it is really not inviting. I work now myself with reception of the elderly, for example, and there the*

built environment is friendly, warm and welcoming. The migration board building is the opposite. You almost feel like you do not want to go inside. It feels scary.[13]

The lack of security resulting from the requirement for residency renewal every three years and differences between family members creates quite a lot of anxiety among Syrians, both in Gothenburg and Malmö. Some migrants have permanent residency, others have Swedish citizenship, while other family members can still be on a three-year temporary residency permit. The continuous threat of the possibility of being sent back to Syria, even with permanent residency, if anti-immigrant parties gain more political power in Sweden, only increases this personal anxiety (Wessels et al., 2021). These are processes that affect refugees that insiders have never experienced. Apart from this absence of similar experiences, insiders tend to also have preconceived ideas about what Syrians should look like and who they are, despite having access to sourced information about Syrian culture, society, and politics.

Syrians in Sweden experience prejudice, and sometimes outright discrimination, based on preconceived ideas about Muslims, Arabs or Syrians in general. One prejudice about Syrians is that they are strict Muslims and therefore potentially violent by nature. One respondent in Malmö described it as follows:

I feel like I always have to defend myself in two ways, first that I am not a terrorist, second that I am a Muslim, and I am proud. But I do not pray, and I drink. I do not behave like this because I am now in Sweden. I did this back in Syria as well ![14]

Another respondent in Gothenburg described some of the many incidents he could recount in which he faced prejudice. For example, when he went to the dentist and did not speak Swedish that well,he spoke in English and the dentist replied "You speak so well in English for a Syrian." He also works at a bar in the city center. He sometimes takes out his hair bun and lets his long, black hair down. A female customer gave him a compliment about his long hair and asked him where he was from. He told her he was Syrian. She replied "But you don't look Syrian!" Based on his appearance, she did not assume he was Syrian, and when he said he was Syrian she assumed he was from a city like Damascus. "But I am from the countryside!" he exclaimed. He told her he could not take it as a compliment. He wondered how she would know what a Syrian is supposed to look like? What do Swedes know about Syrian society that Syrians

[13] *Interview, February 2023*

[14] *Interview, May 2016*

do not know? What stereotypes do non-migrant Swedes attribute to Syrians or others based on their kinships, passport, and nationalities?[15]

A female respondent in Gothenburg described how her Swedish language ability is now at a level that non-migrant Swedes can no longer "place her." So, Swedes will often wonder what accent she speaks with, because something is slightly different. On several occasions, people thought that she was Norwegian due to her accent when she spoke Swedish. She decided to play along for a while and in the end to tell them she is Syrian. A silence then followed because her conversation partner did not know exactly how to react to this.[16]

Respondents to this study, in both Malmö and Gothenborg, reported incidents of Islamophobia and ignorance, but also of people keeping their distance by, for example, not offering a seat on the bus or putting a bag on the empty seat. They reported receiving statements such as "Go home# while on the bus and other public transport. They experienced assumptions that they were violent and even two incidents of physical attack A few respondents who live in the city center of Gothenburg were convinced that there is more racist abuse in the city center than in places like Angered because there are fewer non-migrant Swedes living in Angered, and Syrians/Arabs live in clusters there.

Dealing with these everyday encounters of racism and prejudice is not easy for Syrians. Some have taken to campaigning for their rights and for their voice to be heard, and they are happy to share their experiences with Swedes, to talk about Syria and themselves as a person, as Syrian.

> *We are Syrians that have escaped the war and we need to voice our opinion and show how a Syrian is, a Syrian that does not look like ISIS in anyway, a Syrian who is far from extremism, a Syrian that used to live and sit next to Christians, Kurds, Assyrians, and many different groups in school. This is what we must show here as Syrians, as intellectuals, as academics. We must reflect the best image of a Syrian, starting from work, manners, and the acceptance of the other.*[17]

Others were not quite convinced that everything that they or their Syrian friends encounter is down to racism but instead interpreted this as prejudice from the Syrian point of view. Being talked to badly by a bus driver might just mean that this person has had a bad day. For those

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[15] *Interview, July 2020*

[16] *Interview, February 2023*

[17] *Interview, May 2016*

who see prejudice in everything, even being given a fine is then due to being Syrian, explained one respondent.[18]

Some use a less Arabic sounding nickname in their daily encounters or 'Swedenize' their surname to avoid a prejudiced reaction. Others choose to ignore the discrimination and to challenge themselves and others to engage with other experiences in Sweden, such as sports and other artistic activities and entertainment. Going to Syrian restaurants, listening to Syrian music, and going to Syrian musical concerts is one coping mechanism to deal with both the personal trauma of war and the exclusion, isolation, and racism they experience. Holding on to Syrian identity in small everyday routines is another important coping mechanism for Syrians:

> *Something I need to have every day is to hold on to my Syrian coffee and breakfast in the morning. If I lose this, I will become another person and I do not want that. I will not change my name to fit into Swedish society. Even though it is sometimes difficult because I get discriminated against for my name and my skin color. This is me. This is my identity. I am Syrian.*[19]

5. Conclusion

This study has focused on the experiences and everyday encounters of Syrians in urban areas in Sweden using two case study sites: Gothenburg and Malmö. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, photo-elicitation and participant observation, the experiences of integration and encounters with Swedish social institutions and society were documented, coded and analyzed. Since 2015, both Gothenburg and Malmö have experienced an influx of Syrians fleeing the war in their country. This has led to a sizable Syrian diaspora community in both cities and is reflected in the presence of Syrians in university education, governmental jobs and Swedish companies, and also as entrepreneurs and in the number of Syrian restaurants popping up in city centers.

Enos (2022) has shown that the increase in popularity of right-wing anti-immigrant parties in Sweden is related to the influx of Syrian war refugees in 2015. This is reflected in Syrian experiences of discrimination albeit that the most direct form of discrimination, facing right-

[18] *Interview, May 2016*

[19] *Interview, August 2023*

wing racist abuse, is not the only form of exclusion that Syrians experience in their encounters with Swedish society.

The study shows that Syrians, in general, have more friends with a migrant or international background than with non-migrant Swedes, and that they perceive Swedish society as closed and distant. The contrast in openness and social relations with Arab or Mediterranean cultures is observed by many of the Syrians interviewed. Preconceived ideas in Sweden about who Syrians are, or what they should be, have further led to barriers to communication and daily personal encounters that were experienced by Syrian migrants as alienating, discriminatory and, in some cases, outright offensive and racist. This study demonstrates that subconscious bias and prejudicial assumptions about Syrians, as encountered by Syrians who arrived in Sweden due to the Syrian war, prevent the establishment of deeper connections, friendships and social relationships between migrants (outsiders) and host community members (insiders). As Klarenbeek concludes, integration needs to be conceptualized as a two-way process, and in order for Syrians to be able to become accepted and integrated, non-migrant Swedes also need to become better informed about who Syrians are, i.e., the social, religious and economic diversity of this large group of immigrants (Klarenbeek, 2021).

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