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SECONDARY MIGRATION OF SYRIANS TO EUROPE <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2026-0006>

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This article aims to contribute to the discussion on the secondary migration of Syrian citizens to neighbouring countries and the EU. The thesis of the article is to claim that conflict, which is driven by insecurity, causes the desire to move. The article uses several theoretical perspectives, the most important of which is Ibrahim Sirkeci and Jeffrey H. Cohen's concept of uncertainty and aspiration. The article is divided into several related parts. In the first part, reference is made to secondary migration as a theoretical category, invoking the theories underlying it and the motives behind the gradual migration. The second part discusses the stages of secondary migration of Syrians highlighting the conflicts underlying the decision to relocate. The next part, in turn, is devoted to the migration of Syrians to neighbouring countries and the EU.

Keywords

secondary migration, Syrians, concept of uncertainty and aspiration, EU countries, conflict

Introduction

Syrians have a high rate of applying for international protection and being granted asylum in Europe. The main reason for their migration was the war that had been going on since 2011. The first destination for Syrians was most often neighbouring countries, followed by the EU. The migration crises that Europe was experiencing made it increasingly difficult to reach. Physical barriers at state borders, temporary border controls, and restrictive migration policies have become significant challenges to migration flows. Nevertheless, Syrians continued to undertake secondary migrations to Europe.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the countries neighbouring Syria have become the main areas of first refuge for the fleeing population. Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan have been at the centre of regional migration dynamics, bearing the heaviest burden of incoming migrants both socially and economically. At the same time, their geopolitical

location – at the crossroads of the Middle East and Europe – has made them key actors in shaping migration policies, security, and international relations. Complex political conditions, limited resources, and internal tensions in these countries impacted the living conditions of Syrians, determining their decisions to continue secondary migration to Europe. The factors pushing them out of neighbouring countries were the lack of comprehensive legal solutions related to their social and economic situation and restrictive policies forcing them to return to Syria. Secondary migration was also associated with the negative attitude of host societies, which increasingly perceived the presence of Syrians as a problem. As a result, they lived in a state of suspension, “stripped of their rights,” as Giorgio Agamben wrote about the fate of refugees.

This article aims to contribute to the discussion on the migration of Syrian citizens to neighbouring countries and the EU. Its next aim is to nuance the causes of secondary migration and the theories underlying them. It is also important to analyse the reasons for the subsequent mobility of Syrians. Therefore, this article focuses on the case of secondary mobility of Syrian citizens. The article’s thesis is the claim that conflict driven by uncertainty causes the desire to move. Several theoretical perspectives will be used to verify this claim, the most important of which is the concept of uncertainty and aspiration of Ibrahim Sirkeci and Jeffrey H. Cohen. The article attempts to answer the following questions: what is secondary migration, and what causes it? What is the model of secondary migration of Syrians? How many Syrian citizens have emigrated to neighbouring countries? Why did they decide on the next stages of migration? and did the decreasing number of registered refugees from Syria in neighbouring countries result in an increase in applications for international protection in EU countries? The article was prepared based on research methods characteristic of political and administrative sciences (comparative), historical sciences (deductive, inductive, genetic), and sociological sciences (statistical). It was divided into several related parts. In the first part, secondary migration was referred to as a theoretical category, recalling the theories underlying it and the motives behind the gradual migration. In the second part, Syrians’ secondary migration stages were discussed, highlighting the conflicts underlying the decision to relocate. The next part, in turn, was devoted to the migrations of Syrians to neighbouring countries and the EU.

Secondary migration as a theoretical category

For the purposes of this article, secondary migration can be defined as the movement of a migrant from one country to another in order to seek international protection or settlement. It can also be called staged, gradual, or taking place “step by step” (Bredeloup & Pliez, 2005). It is based on similar factors as in the case of primary migration, i.e., family, economic, social, and political. It also depends on personal circumstances, wealth, and cultural ties. Migration decisions are, therefore, not made in a vacuum. Many individual and social factors influence them. Aspirations towards a better future are also important.

Migration opportunities are related to positive (“freedom to”) and negative (“freedom from”) freedoms. According to Isaiah Berlin’s concept, mobility can be seen as an ability or freedom to move and choose one’s residence. The first of the freedoms relates to taking control of own life and achieving fundamental goals, and the second refers to the absence of obstacles or limitations (e.g., freedom of movement). The first relates to opportunities, and the second refers to aspirations and also possibilities under the right conditions

(e.g., migration policy) (de Haas, 2021, p. 25). However, one can have “freedom to” migrate, but due to lack of financial resources or “freedom from” being imprisoned being thus unable to exercise mobility. In turn, having access to both freedoms, one may or may not migrate.

In discussing secondary migration, one should also refer to the conceptualization of human mobility by Ibrahim Sirkeci and Jeffrey H. Cohen. They argue that migration is “a combination of two concepts: uncertainty and aspiration” (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2016, p. 97). It is caused by conflict accompanied by uncertainty. When it is difficult to control, the likelihood of mobility increases. Uncertainty is supported by unfulfilled aspirations that appear at a certain stage of life. The uncertainty that stimulates and limits mobility is influenced by material (economic) and intangible (cultural) factors (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2016, p. 97), which stimulate and restrict mobility. Migration aspirations, on the other hand, are nothing more than the desire or desire to migrate. They arise by comparing places to live based on the individual’s specific needs and preferences (push-pull theory). Migration aspirations, according to J. Carling and K. Schewel, can be seen through the prism of a migrant’s personality or identity, of which they are the embodiment (Carling & Schewel, 2018, p. 954). They reflect “people’s general life preferences, as well as their subjective perception of opportunities and life elsewhere” (de Haas, 2021, p. 17). Aspirations can result in displacement or not (Carling & Schewel, 2018, p. 947, 954). Mobility, in the opinion of J. Carling and K. Schewel, depends on the “concept of migratory capacity,” i.e. the willingness to leave (Carling & Schewel, 2018, p. 955). Potential migrants are aware of the barriers they may encounter when moving, especially if they wish to do so illegally. They are also aware of the emergence of unforeseen situations. These elements may discourage them from mobility. However, aspirations related to achieving material and social success motivate them to migrate. Aspirations are influenced by education level, cultural conditions of the migrant, individual predispositions/personhood, and subjective needs.

As noted earlier, secondary migration is the resettlement of people from one country to another. Most often the country of initial migration is a neighbouring country, to which it is relatively easy and cheap to access. They are located close to the homeland, which makes it easier to return once the causes of migration have ceased. The choice of another country is more thoughtful. It is associated with the accumulation of resources for travel since the next destination is usually located further from the homeland and the country of first residence. The countries of the second choice are more prosperous than the original peregrination. The above considerations were confirmed as early as 1885 by Ernest George Ravenstein. He developed seven rules governing displacement, the first of which states that people most often migrate to places where the distance from the place of residence is not great. In turn, according to the second rule, migration proceeds in stages from underdeveloped areas to places of higher development (Slany, 1995, pp. 36–37). In addition, Ravenstein also announced another rule that can be used in secondary migration. This is the main driver of mobility, i.e., the improvement of one’s material existence (the seventh rule). This type of migration can have an economic but also political and social dimension. Due to the failure to meet expectations in the country of the first migration, the dissatisfied migrant, according to the theory of Alberto O. Hirschman, can leave, but also accept the conditions or change them by raising their voice (Hirschman, 1978).

Another reason for secondary migration has its roots in the theory of migration networks. Family members and friends living in another country can be an element of at-

traction, which leads to the 'migration chain'. Thus, the migrant may once again decide to relocate in order to join their own community, which in the initial phase will be essential to acclimatise in a new place. Thanks to them, the adaptation period can be shortened. In addition, they can be a support in securing housing or employment. Using the migration network is a valuable source of information about migration, which can minimize the costs and setbacks of migration.

Secondary migration can be caused by migration/refugee policies in certain countries. It can be a 'litmus test' for migrants who want to improve their situation and thus be an attraction. It may also push the migrant out of a given country and encourage the migrant to migrate further. Another push factor associated with these policies may be the failure to integrate with the society of the host country of the original migration. These may be related to the growing animosity (xenophobia) towards migrants and the lack or insufficient integration policies. Another push factor may also be the irregular residence status of the migrant in the country of the first migration.

In my opinion, the culture of migration also influences migration. By this term, Syed Ali means "ideas, practices, and cultural artefacts that reinforce the celebration of migration and migrants. This includes beliefs, desires, symbols, myths, education, the celebration of migration in various media, and material good" (Syed, 2007, p. 39). This culture triggers the desire to migrate, allows the migrant to be seen as a hero worthy of imitation who improves the family's living standard (remittances). This concept is similarly defined by William Kandel and Douglas S. Massey. According to them, the essence of this term, "... is that non-migrants observe migrants with whom they are socially connected and try to imitate their migratory behaviours (Kandel & Massey, 2002, p. 983). The culture of migration is a product of the existence of a migration network. It motivates migrants to migrate and perceives the migrant as a winner. Culture promotes both primary and secondary migration. Migration is one of several strategies that migrants have in their "cultural repertoire" to achieve their life goals (Swidler 1986).

The model of the secondary migration of Syrians

The model of secondary migration of Syrians consists of two stages, the second of which can be repeated. The multiplicity of the second stage will depend primarily on the achievement of the social equilibrium to which Harold W. Saunders refers (Sally, 1995, p. 37). This model was based on the research of Irene Tuzi (Tuzi, 2019). It consists of:

- Stage I – it takes place inside the country as well as outside its borders. People migrate most often to neighbouring countries. These are the countries of first migration, where basic needs are met. This primarily concerns security, which in the first phase of stay in the new country is a guarantee of staying in it. This means that the conflict that underpinned the first migration has been averted. Getting out of the conflict zone and finding a safe place was the goal of the first migration;
- Stage II – After overcoming the first conflict and meeting basic needs in the new place, the migrant faces further challenges. He notes that his stay in the first country of mobility is disrupted by the imbalance between gains and losses/expectations and reality. His access to the labour market, health care or education is threatened. A divide emerges that causes "population pressure," according to H. W. Saunders. This creates another conflict that drives new migratory movements. At their root is uncer-

tainty. This disparity depends on many individual factors. One such is the migrant's education level. Those with higher education will have higher aspirations and thus may be more disappointed in staying in a new place than those with lower education. Another factor driving the gap between expectations and reality is age. People of reproductive age will react differently than older people. Those who have a longer life ahead of them, the prospects of starting a family and having children, will be more likely to decide to move further in search of more convenient living conditions than older people. Until the migrant achieves a balance between expectations and reality and thus gets rid of uncertainty, he will continue to move. If their aspirations are met, mobility will end.

As the above considerations suggest, the motives of primary and secondary migration are shaped by various factors. The first can be explained by the existence of violence and fear of persecution. The second one can be explained by the lack of long-term solutions and opportunities for development, and discrimination (Tyldum & Zhuang, 2022). Guri Tyldum and Huafeng Zhuang believe that factors driving secondary migration can also be: (1) employment problems, poverty (especially women) – lack of economic (food) security, (2) human resources related to education and age – those (usually men) with higher education have stronger aspirations for mobility, as do those under 30, (3) Social networks in countries of peregrination (family, friends, acquaintances) (Tyldum & Zhuang, 2022).

Migration of Syrians to neighbouring countries and the EU

The Syrian crisis is one of the largest displacement crises in the world. It has triggered the migration of some 13 million people, of which 6.4 million have been internally displaced (Syria at 2020, p. 28). UNHCR estimates that in 2023, the total number of Syrian citizens under protection was 5,424,016 (Syria Regional, 2023). They were mainly in neighbouring countries, namely Turkey (64.5% or 3,500,964), Lebanon (15%, 814,715), Jordan (12.2%, 661,854), Iraq (4.8%, 259,584) and Egypt (2.7%, 145,157). The smallest number of people (less than 1%) made it to other countries (North Africa) (Syria Regional 2023). In addition to the above countries, Syrians also sought refuge in EU countries. 1.4 million Syrian citizens (most of them in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden) found international protection in member states (Syria Situation, 2021, p. 7).

Most Syrians after 2011, as previously noted, fled to neighbouring countries. However, after a few years in these countries, they chose to migrate to Europe because of the stability of EU countries, the improvement of their economic situation, better prospects for the future, and the guarantee of freedoms. This is confirmed by studies conducted on Syrian refugees by Guri Tyldum. They show that migration to Europe from Jordan and Lebanon was perceived by Syrians in terms of access to economic prosperity and dignified life. On the other hand, they were aware of cultural alienation, social exclusion, and loneliness (Tyldum, 2021).

Leaving the country of the first migration was associated with deteriorating economic, political, and social conditions. In addition, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, to which most Syrians arrived, did not respect the principle of non-refoulement. The first two countries are not signatories to the Geneva Convention, although Jordan is obliged to abide by it under a memorandum signed with the UNHCR in 1998. This also applies to Turkey, which has signed the convention. This country, like Lebanon, launched a policy of returning

Syrians to their homeland, contrary to the above principle. This situation took place when reports by many international organizations viewed Syria as a dangerous country with human rights violations and a permanent economic and humanitarian crisis. In addition, this was a time when Syria was classified by the Failed States Index (FSI) as the most unstable country in the world. In 2021–2022, it ranked third, and was in fourth place in 2024. Only South Sudan, Yemen, and Somalia (Fraigle) were more difficult. Instability in Syria was also associated with a lack of respect for political rights and civil liberties. This was confirmed by Freedom House's reports. And so, for example, in 2022–2024, Syria was declared an unfree state, scoring 1 point out of 100 possible (Freedom, 2023, p. 31; Syria. Freedom, 2024). Launching a return to Syria in this situation was impossible, though feasible for Turkey and Lebanon. This stance of the governments of these countries was the result of their convenience due to their lack of interest in the protection of Syrians in their territories. This activity was accompanied by anti-Syrian policies, the practice of closing borders (e.g., denial of entry, construction of a wall on the Syrian-Turkish border), restricting the rights of migrants, arrests, and forced deportations (Adamczyk, 2023).

The difficult economic situation in Lebanon and the hostile atmosphere towards Syrians inspired them to leave the country. According to a survey conducted in September 2020, 27% of respondents planned to leave Lebanon for a third country; a year later, it was 47%, and in 2022, 69% (including 72% who did not have legal residency). Only 2% of the respondents wanted to return to Syria (2022) (Endless, 2022, p. 28). The mood resulting from this survey was evident in the statistics. From year to year, the number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon declined. While in July 2020 there were 880,414, this number decreased by more than 25,000 a year later and two years later by more than 49,000. At the end of August 2024, it numbered 774,697 refugees.¹

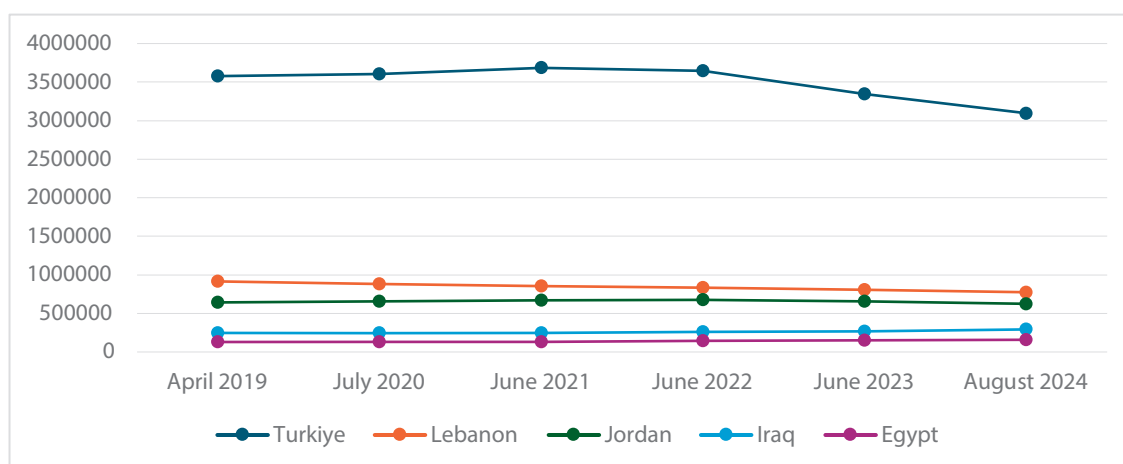
Economic difficulties, anti-Syrian policies, and acts of discrimination against Syrians by the Turks were also the reasons for shortening their stay in the Turkish state. According to the survey ("Syrians Barometer") conducted in 2021. Syrians were more anxious about their life in this country. While in 2019 and 2020, more than 62% of the respondents linked their future to Turkey, in 2021 this ratio fell to 31% (Erdoğan 2021, p. 17). This attitude was also reflected in the statistics, which show the shrinking of the Syrian community in Turkey. This was noticeable from 2022 when the number of registered refugees from Syria fell by more than 35,800 compared to the previous year (3,648,583). This was the first time the number of refugees has decreased since 2019. In the following years, this trend continued, and at the end of August 2024, there were 3,096,157 people (Data is from the reports listed in footnote 1).

Apart from the above countries, in Iraq and in Egypt there was an increase in the number of registered refugees from Syria in the period 2019–2024. In the first of these, there were 245,810 Syrians in April 2019, and in August 2024, the number of refugees increased

1 The data comes from reports: Syria at War: Eight Years On, ESCWA, Beirut (2020), p. 29, MENA—Durable Solutions Dashboard—July 2020 (2020), UNHCR; Durable Solutions dashboard—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—June 2021 (2021), UNHCR, Durable Solutions dashboard—Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey—June 2022 (2022), UNHCR, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—June 2023 (2023), UNHCR, <https://data-dev.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/102107> Durable Solutions dashboard—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, & Turkey—August 2024 (2024), UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111452> <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/syria-at-war-report-en.pdf> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/78766> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/87903> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/94340>.

to 292,419. In Egypt, on the other hand, the increase of Syrian refugees in the period under review was lower, and it was 129,210 in April 2019 and 157,806 in August 2024 (Data is from the reports listed in footnote 1). A slightly different situation was noted in Jordan. In this country, the number of registered Syrian refugees increased from April 2019 to June 2022. After this period, their number began to decline and, in August 2024, stood at 624,499, while in previous years, it fluctuated between 645,692 (04.2019) and 675,433 (06.2022) (Data is from the reports listed in footnote 1).

Figure 1. Number of registered Syrian refugees in selected countries in 2019–2024

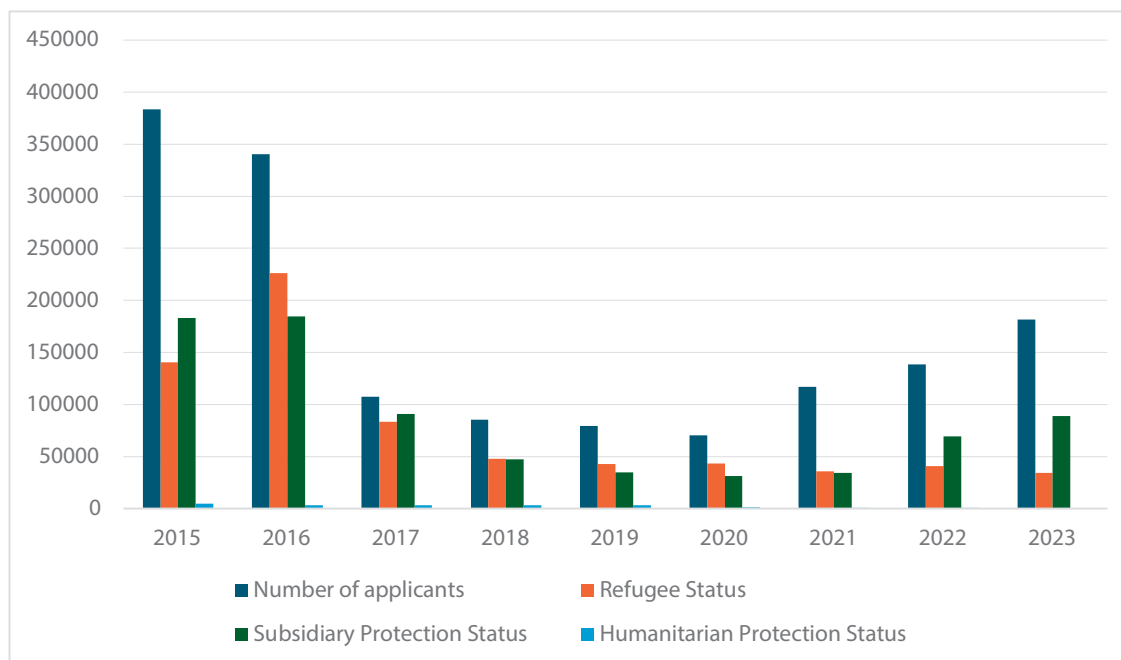


Source: UN ESCWA. (2020). *Syria at War: Eight Years On*. <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/syria-at-war-report-en.pdf>; UNHCR. (2021, June). *Durable Solutions dashboard – Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey*. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/87903>; UNHCR. (2023, June). *Durable Solutions dashboard – Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey*. <https://data-dev.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/102107>; UNHCR. (2024, August). *Durable Solutions dashboard – Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey*. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111452>.

The decrease in the number of registered Syrians in the countries analysed above (apart from Iraq and Egypt) was related to their continued migration. Only a few chose to return to their homeland voluntarily. The rest moved on, going to, among others, EU countries. After the migration crisis that affected EU member states in 2015, the number of Syrians applying for asylum in the EU fell until 2020. And so, in 2015, 383,710 Syrian citizens applied for protection, and after five years only 70,340. Since 2021, the opposite trend has been observed. The number of Syrians applying for asylum this year was already 117,160, and two years later increased to 181,356 (Asylum Report, 2020; Asylum Report, 2022; Asylum Report, 2023; Asylum Report, 2025). Syrians were the most numerous nations applying for international protection in EU countries, from 2015 to 2023. In addition to them, citizens of Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, and Venezuela were also numerous.

The long-term consequences of the secondary migration of Syrians to the European Union have been multidimensional, encompassing demographic, economic, social, political, and legal-institutional aspects. The influx of Syrian refugees has affected the demographic structure of EU member states, increasing the proportion of people of working age and partially alleviating challenges associated with the aging of European societies. At the same time, migration has contributed to greater ethnic and cultural diversity, which—when supported by appropriate integration measures—can enrich local communities.

Figure 2. Number of Syrians applying to international protection and number of statuses granted to them: refugee, subsidiary protection, and humanitarian protection in the first, second, and higher instances in 2015–2023 2015–2023.



There is no data on the humanitarian protection status granted to Syrians in 2023 in I, II and higher instances, and in 2020, 2021 and 2022 in II and higher instances.

Source: EUAA. (2020). *Asylum Report 2020. Statistical tables*. <https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2020/statistical-tables>; EUAA. (2022). *Asylum Report 2022. Statistical tables (2016–2021)*. <https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2022/table-1-asylum-applicants-eu-countries-reporting-country-and-main-citizenship-2016-2021>; EUAA. (2023). *Asylum Report 2023. Statistical tables*. <https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2023/statistical-tables>; EUAA. (2024). *Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the European Union*. https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2024-06/2024_Asylum_Report_EN.pdf

Economically, secondary migration generated both benefits and challenges. Syrians gradually entered the labour market, filling gaps in sectors experiencing labour shortages, while initially requiring integration, educational, and financial support. The social consequences of secondary migration included both the risk of tensions (if the integration process was flawed) and the potential to build more pluralistic societies. In the political sphere, secondary migration of Syrians to Europe has heightened the importance of migration in public debate, often becoming a key element of election campaigns and leading to increased support for populist or anti-immigration parties. This phenomenon has put pressure on member state governments and EU institutions, forcing discussions on reforming asylum policies, the Dublin system, and migrant relocation rules.

Finally, secondary migration also had legal and institutional implications, demonstrating the need for more coherent and sustainable migration management mechanisms within the EU. This included harmonizing procedures, establishing uniform integration standards, and developing effective instruments for cooperation with Syria's neighbouring countries. In summary, the secondary migration of Syrians to Europe is a persistent and multifaceted phenomenon. Its consequences will shape European societies, economies,

and political systems for years to come. The complexity of this process requires long-term, coordinated action at both the Member State level and in the European Union as a whole.

Summary

The first migrations of Syrians were coercive. Their mobility was a survival strategy during wartime. Moving to neighbouring countries guaranteed proximity to home and a quick return after the conflict ended. Subsequent migrations, in turn, were usually driven by social, economic, and political factors in the country of first migration.

However, turning Europe into a fortress can change the plans of migrants who are in the country of the first migration and thus prolong their stay. Countries neighbouring Syria are aware of this and are looking for other ways to encourage their citizens to leave. One way was to try to implement a policy of return to their homeland. However, this was a difficult procedure due to the creeping conflict and very difficult living conditions in Syria.

Syrians can, therefore, remain in the countries of first migration or go on a further journey to EU countries. As shown in the article, this depends on many factors. It has to do with the uncertainties and aspirations of the migrants, which arose as a result of the conflict. When the conflict that caused the first migration ceases and the goal of mobility is realized, the migrant staying in the country of first migration will face new challenges. Differences between expectations and reality (Harold W. Saunders's theory) creates another conflict that drives further migration movements. As shown in the article, the growing political, economic, and social problems in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon showed that the change in the policy of the authorities of these countries towards Syrians and the reluctance of the host public were the elements pushing them out of the countries of first migration. These factors triggered a conflict among Syrian citizens that mobilized them to continue migrating towards Europe.

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