



OPINION OTHER VOICES

More Syrians are leaving home

Migrants seek Europe, driven by post-war misery

She had already walked for 60 hours through the wet, dark forests of Poland, trying to make her way to Germany, when the 29-year-old Syrian Kurd twisted her knee.

It wasn't the first setback in Bushra's journey.

Earlier, her road companion and best friend had fainted in a panic attack as Polish border guards chased them. They hid in ditches and behind trees as her friend tried to regain her breath, but it was no good. They turned themselves in and the guards dumped them back across the border into Belarus.

They quickly returned, bedraggled and wet, on the same trail. After twisting her knee, Bushra persevered. For two more days, she dragged her right foot behind her through the rain and freezing temperatures of the forests. Finally, they reached a Polish village where a car took them across the border into Germany - for a life she hopes will be free.

"I put up with the unbearable pain. Running away from something is sometimes the easiest thing," Bushra said in the central German town of Giessen, where she applied for asylum as a refugee. "There is no future for us in Syria."

Bushra, who asked that her last name be withheld for her own safety, is the face of the new Syrian migrant. More Syrians are leaving home, even though the 10-year-old civil war has wound down and conflict lines have been frozen for years.

They are fleeing not from the war's horrors, which drove hundreds of thousands to Europe in the massive wave of 2015, but from the misery of the war's aftermath. They have lost hope in a future at home amid abject poverty, rampant corruption and wrecked infrastructure, as well as continued hostilities, government repression and revenge attacks by multiple armed groups.

More than 78,000 Syrians have applied for asylum in the European Union so far this year, a 70% increase from last year, according to EU records. After Afghans, Syrians are the largest single nationality among this year's nearly 500,000 asylum applicants so far.

Nine out of 10 people live in poverty in Syria. Around 13 million need humanitarian assistance, a 20% increase from the year before. The government is unable to secure basic needs, and nearly 7 million are internally displaced.



Syrian Kurd Bushra, who only gave her first name, poses for a photograph in Minsk, Belarus, Sept. 22, 2021. (AP)

Roads, telecommunications, hospitals and schools have been devastated by the war and widening economic sanctions are making reconstruction impossible.

The coronavirus pandemic compounded the worst economic crisis since the war began in 2011. Syria's currency is collapsing, and minimum wage is barely enough to buy five pounds of meat a month, if meat is even available. Crime and drug production are on the rise while militias, backed by foreign powers, operate smuggling rackets and control entire villages and towns.

The numbers are far below the levels of 2015, but desperate Syrians are racing to get out. Social media groups are dedicated to helping them find a way. Users ask where they can apply for work or scholarship visas. Others seek advice on the latest migration routes, cost of smugglers, and how risky it would be to use assumed identities to get out of Syria or enter other countries.

At the same time, Syria's neighbors, grappling with their own economic crises, are calling for the refugees on their soil to be sent home. Among the new migrants to the EU are Syrians leaving Turkey or Lebanon, where they had been refugees for years.

Belarus briefly opened its border with Poland to migrants this summer. That created a standoff with the EU, which accuses Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko of orchestrating illegal migration in retaliation for European sanctions against him.

Bushra was one of only several thousand who managed to get through from Belarus, where 15 died trying to make the trek.

She left for Minsk from Irbil, Iraq, in late September.

It was the start of a harrowing journey. Bushra recounted how they survived on biscuits and water for days and how six of them slept sitting up on a single dry mat. Her friend broke a tooth shivering from the cold.

After the forest ordeal, they had to hide in a ditch at one point when a police patrol with sniffer dogs came to check their car. Riding along the highway, Bushra removed her head scarf to avoid suspicion at checkpoints. She reached Giessen on Oct. 12.

"I surprised myself by how I put up with all this," Bushra said.

It was all worth it, she said. "When you lose hope, you follow a path more dangerous than where you started."

Bushra's life in Syria had been in upheaval for years. She was at university in the eastern city of Deir el-Zour when the war broke out in 2011 and anti-government protests spread in the city. She quickly moved to another university farther north. Soon Deir el-Zour and the rest of the east were taken over by the Islamic State group.

Bushra and her parents were outside IS rule in the Kurdish-held northeast but still lived in fear of violence. She hardly left the house for two years.

Eventually, she found a job with an international aid group. Ever since, she saved up to leave, checking into routes out of Syria.

Syria's oil-rich northeast, which already suffered from years of neglect, was devastated by the war. Drought wrecked farmers' livelihoods. The currency collapse gutted incomes. The salary of Bushra's father, a government employee, is now worth \$15 a month, down from \$100 at the start of the war.

Moreover, the region was not secure. IS militants were defeated in 2019, but sleeper cells continue to target Kurdish-led security and civil administration.

Eight kidnappings were reported this summer in a town near her.

Threats were made against Bushra after she exposed a corruption case involving powerful local officials, causing her to fear for her life. She declined to give details because her family remains in Syria.

The harassment expedited her plans to leave and convinced her parents, who had been worried about a single woman going on such a journey alone.

The U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan this summer raised Bushra's worries that the U.S. would also pull out its 900 troops in Syria's Kurdish-administered northeast. The troops carry out anti-terrorism operations with local forces, and their presence also keeps rival forces at bay.

If they withdraw, she feared that Turkey, which considers the Kurdish-led forces in Syria as terrorists, could launch a military campaign against the Kurds. Syrian government forces would also move in, endangering Bushra because they consider those who work with international aid groups unregistered in Damascus as traitors.

"If I stay in Syria, I will be pursued by security all my life," she said. Gaining asylum and residency in Germany is her gateway to freedom.

She hopes to study political science to understand the news, which she boycotted since the war started to avoid scenes of the atrocities she was already living. She wants to have freedom to travel. "I am done with restrictions," she said.

Going back to Syria is impossible, she said. If she doesn't get her papers in Germany, Bushra says she will keep trying.

"If I can't get to where I want to go, I will go to where I can live." (AP)



Nadine Kalache Maalouf, (center), Celine Elbacha and Elbacha's daughter Morgane, (right), stand on a deck at the seaside in eastern coastal resort of Paralimni, Cyprus, on Dec. 22, 2021. They are among the thousands of Lebanese, including teachers, doctors and nurses who have left the country amid a devastating economic crisis that has thrown two thirds of the country's population into poverty since October 2019. Inset: Picture shows the three walking on the beach. (AP)

Over 12,000 Lebanese have fled their homeland in the past two years for Cyprus

The well-off find a new home in Cyprus

Many well-off Lebanese who escaped their country's economic tailspin for a new life in the nearby island nation of Cyprus say the transition has been a whirlwind of emotions.

They are grateful they did not have to turn to human smugglers and embark on risky Mediterranean crossings to reach European shores. But they also feel guilty for leaving family and friends behind to struggle with Lebanon's unprecedented crises - a failing economy, political uncertainty and social upheaval.

The feelings are intense for Celine Elbacha, an architect who moved with her family of four to the Mediterranean island nation in August 2020, and Nadine Kalache Maalouf, who arrived with her husband and two children four months ago.

They are among more than 12,000 Lebanese who have left their homeland in the past two years for Cyprus - less than a 50-minute flight from Beirut - enrolling their kids in schools, setting up businesses and snapping up apartments on the island.

"We were fortunate to be able to come," Maalouf said. "We're doing our best here as a Lebanese community to help ... our families, our friends back home. So it's not like we just moved and we turned our backs and we're not looking back."

Thousands of Lebanese, including teachers, doctors and nurses have left the country amid a devastating economic crisis that has thrown two thirds of the country's population into poverty since October 2019. That brain drain accelerated after the massive explosion at Beirut's port last

year, when a stockpile of improperly stored ammonium nitrates detonated, killing at least 216 people and destroying several residential areas.

The exodus is telling about the state of Lebanon, where not only the poor are seeking a way out, but also a relatively well-off middle class that has lost faith in the country turning itself around.

For those who can afford it, Cyprus, a member of the European Union, is an attractive option for its proximity and the facilities it offers - including residency for a certain level of investment in real estate and businesses. As Lebanese banks clamped down on deposits, many sought to open bank accounts in Cyprus or buy apartments as a way to free up their money.

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editor's choice

