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Asylum Seekers of the Syrian Conflict:
procedures and patterns of settlement in
Germany

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Abstract

This paper reports the procedures of asylum and patterns of settlement of asylum seekers in Germany, with special focus on the asylum seekers of the Syrian conflict. Initially prepared for a workshop comparing policy responses and settlement outcomes of the Syrian conflict in several countries, this paper presents the German case addressing the development of refugee intake, asylum application duration and results and access to family unification between the years 2015 and 2017. Based on findings of the project “Addressing the Diversity of Asylum Seekers’ Needs and Aspirations”, the paper highlights the response of German authorities and civil society to the refugee intake on arrival, and exemplifies the diversity of local actors that engage actively in supporting refugee accommodation and integration measures. Additionally, it addresses the different post arrival programs and policies for accommodation and integration and the differential access of asylum seekers to different rights, offers and services. Finally, the paper summarizes the state of research into refugee intake in Germany focusing on Syrian conflict refugees..

Keywords: Syrian Conflict, Asylum seekers, refugee intake, Germany, Asylum procedures, Settlement patterns

Author

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Contents

Features of the Syrian conflict Intake	7
Resettlement and Visa Characteristics	10
The Asylum Process in Germany	12
Syrian asylum seekers in the Asylum Procedure: a good Bleibeperspektive	14
Duration of Asylum Procedure	16
Family Unification	17
Ethnic and Religious Composition of Syrian Asylum Seekers	21

Features of the Syrian conflict Intake¹

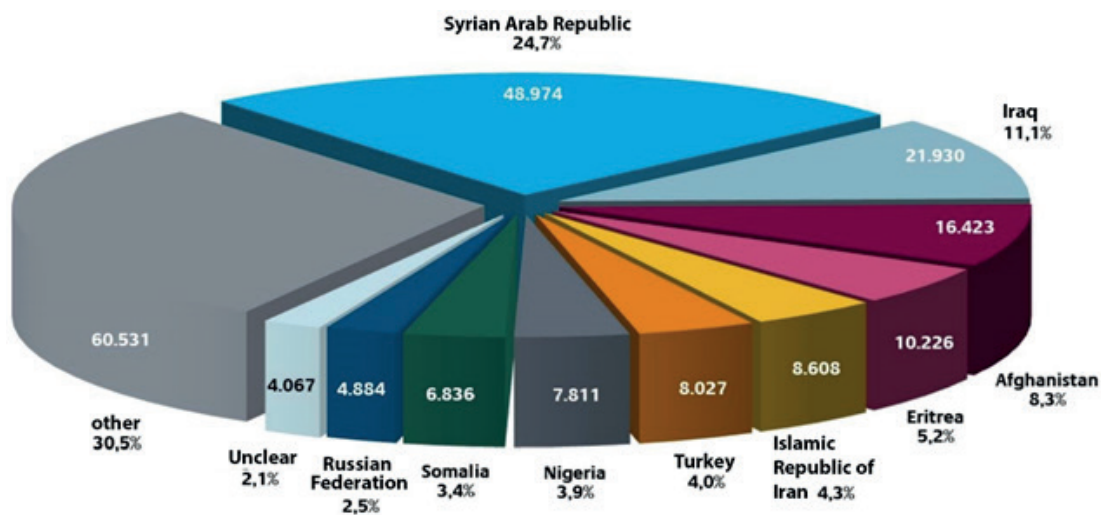
Germany has been one of the most attractive destinations for asylum seekers in Europe in recent years (Grote 2017). Before the summer of 2015 in which the borders were opened allowing hundreds of thousands of people into Europe, Germany had a few resettlement programs designated for the intake of people in need of protection (see section 3). However, and unlike countries of resettlement, since the beginning of the so-called “refugee crisis”, the majority of asylum seekers applied for asylum after they had arrived in Germany and waited for a decision about their legal status and whether they would be recognized as refugees. Statistics in Germany, therefore, mostly include asylum seekers and applicants before the clarification of their legal status, and not only already recognized refugees.

Between the beginning of 2014 and the end of 2017, about 1,625 million asylum applications were submitted into Germany by asylum seekers from a wide variety of origins. Since 2005, Syria has been continuously among the top ten countries represented in the asylum-seeking population arriving in Germany (BAMF 2017b), and Syrians constituted the largest group (513,213 applications) of asylum seekers between 2014 and 2017.

1 This paper was initially written for a workshop at the University of Technology Sydney entitled “Syrian Conflict Refugees: policy responses and settlement outcomes in Scandinavia, Europe, North America and Australasia” in 2018. The workshop compared reception policies and settlement outcomes of Syrian-conflict refugees in several countries across five continents. This paper presents the case of Germany and draws partly on findings from two research projects implemented at the Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity that were financially supported by the Volkswagen Foundation. The pilot project “Addressing the Diversity of Asylum Seekers’ Needs and Aspirations” in 2016 (<https://www.mmg.mpg.de/353363/diversity-of-asylum-seekers-needs-and-aspirations>) and the follow up project “Between accommodation and integration: comparing institutional arrangements for asylum seekers” in 2017-18 (<https://www.mmg.mpg.de/227364/between-accommodation-and-integration>) investigated the needs and aspirations of asylum-seekers in Germany, the state and non-state responses to their intake, and the accommodation and integration policies implemented. Although the projects did not focus on a specific ethnic group or nationality among asylum seekers, the author, a Post-Doc member of the projects’ team and a native speaker of Arabic, had easy access to many Syrian-conflict asylum seekers and refugees. She implemented much of her fieldwork with Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians, Lebanese and Arabic speaking Kurds from Syria and Iraq, which gave her insights into the specificities of the Syrian-conflict refugees and asylum-seekers.

In the year 2017 alone, according to the BAMF (2017a), from the 198,317 asylum applications submitted in Germany, 48,974 applications were submitted by Syrians, which makes them the largest group constituting 24.7% of all asylum applicants. These were followed by asylum applicants from Iraq at 11.1%, Afghanistan at 8.3%, Eritrea at 5.2% and Iran at 4.3%.

Figure 1: Asylum Seekers by Nationality in 2017



Source: BAMF 2017a, p.8

The gender balance of asylum seekers arriving in Germany has been changing since the peak of the “crisis” in 2015. While the percentage of females to males was about 30% to 70% in 2015, that percentage increased to 35% in 2016 and to 40% in 2017 (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung 2018), indicating a gradual increase in the number of female applicants since the peak of the crisis in 2015.

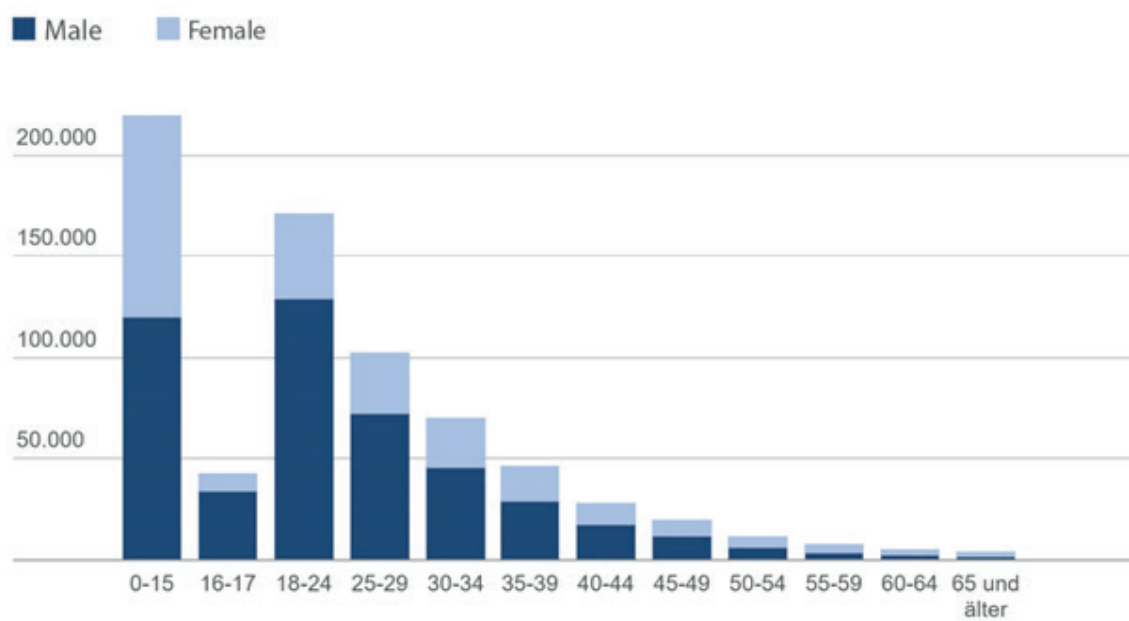
The asylum seeking population is young compared to the European host populations. Between 2014 and 2017, an average of 70% of asylum applicants per year were under the age of 30. That percentage was especially high in 2017 at 75.2%. Their detailed distribution by age and gender is presented in Figure 2.

In the year 2016, the number of Syrians² in Germany was 637,845 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017); 63.7% of those were male and 36.2% females. This population had an average age of 24.3 (24.8 for males and 23.5 for females). 78.3% of Syrians were under the age of 35, and 54.7% under the age of 25. The biggest age group of Syrians was the

² Syrians here refers to all Syrians in Germany, not only asylum seekers.

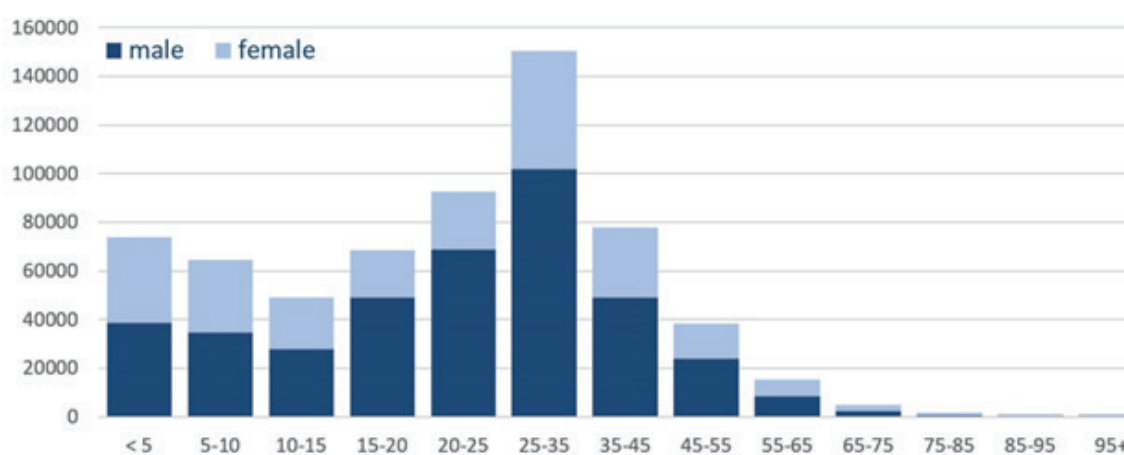
group of 25-35 year olds. The distribution of Syrians by gender and age are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 2: Asylum Seekers in Germany by Age and Gender in 2016



Source: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2018

Figure 3: Syrian Asylum Seekers by Age and Gender in 2016



Source: (Statistisches Bundesamt 2017)

For the same year, and from all Syrians, 64% were single (69% of males and 56% of females) and 34% were married (30% of males and 41% of females).

Resettlement and Visa Characteristics

Within the numbers of asylum seekers and applicants presented above, some came to Germany through specific programs (BAMF 2017b):

(1) The Resettlement Program in 2012-2015

Germany offered a residency permit to vulnerable people needing humanitarian protection like Viet-nameese boat refugees, refugees of Civil War from Kosovo, African refugees from Malta as well as Iraqi refugees from Jordan, Syria, and Turkey. Within the framework of this program, people who fled their homelands and sought asylum in third countries, were received by Germany for lack of integration-perspectives in those third countries, and the lack of possibility to return home. This institutionalized resettlement program received 300 persons per year between 2012 and 2014. In 2015, the intake had risen to 500 persons.

(2) The Humanitarian Intake of Syrian Asylum Seekers in 2013-2015

Through pressure from human rights organizations and other actors, the federal government created a program in 2013 to absorb Syrian refugees. Almost all federal states followed suit and created intake programs mostly for Syrian asylum seekers who have relatives in Germany. In the years from 2013 to 2015, about 20,000 Syrian nationals were allowed to travel directly to Germany from Syria's neighboring countries and Egypt. Those came through federal states' programs and were funded by private sponsors (Arab, 2016), who struggle with the federal states regarding their financial responsibilities. Meanwhile the federal state stopped its intake, but a few programs of federal states are still ongoing (flüchtlingshelfer.info 2017; resettlement.de). However, the chances to take in Syrian refugees legally are very restricted (Pro Asyl 2017).

Those received through resettlement programs are expected to receive long-term residency permits, whereas those who receive protection based on humanitarian grounds can only receive temporary residency.

(3) The EU Resettlement program of 2016-2017

This program is a follow up on the resettlement program in point (1), and led in 2016 and 2017 to an increased intake of 1600 persons annually. After starting the pilot phase with 40 persons in the end of 2015, the focus changed to the reception of Syrian asylum-seekers from Turkey within the framework of the 1:1 mechanism of the EU-Turkey deal.³ In 2016, 1060 Syrian resettlement refugees arrived in Germany from Turkey and 155 from Lebanon (BAMF 2016a).

(4) The EU-Relocation program 2015-2017

In addition to resettlement, the EU migration agenda focused on the need for fair distribution of asylum-seekers. Since 2015 and within this framework, Germany has received vulnerable people who have applied for international asylum and protection in Greece or Italy. The aim of this system is to relieve both countries through better distribution of asylum seekers throughout Europe and to implement the asylum process in an EU member state that has absorption capacity. With this aim, 160,000 protection and asylum seekers were to be relocated to the members of the EU between September 2015 and 2017. The quota for Germany was set at 27,536 asylum-seekers. This quota is calculated quarterly, and the regulation involves only nationals from countries who at the time of reception have an average recognition possibility of a minimum of 75% EU-wide (e.g. Syria, Eritrea). This opened the possibility for Germany to use this quota –partly- for direct reception of Syrian refugees from Turkey. Since September 2016, Germany offers 1000 monthly relocation “vacancies” that are to be shared equally by Greece and Italy.

A small percentage of resettlement refugees arrive with visas or residency permits and usually through legal flights to Germany, in comparison to the majority that applies for a status within the country after arriving “illegally”. Recognized refugees have a right to claim a permanent residency permits after five years.

3 The EU fulfills its obligations in this agreement -signed in 2016- by receiving one asylum seeker from Turkey, for every asylum seeker that Turkey takes back, who had come illegally into Europe through Greek islands. For every returned Syrian national, the EU takes a Syrian national in the framework of a resettlement program on a 1:1 mechanism. In 2016, the EU received about 2,350 Syrian refugees from Turkey.

The Asylum Process in Germany

The majority of asylum seekers that applied for protection in Germany between 2014 and 2017 applied for asylum after entering the country. According to the BAMF (BAMF 2016b; BAMF 2016c), the main stages of the German asylum procedure for adult persons are as follows:

1. Arrival and registration in Germany
2. Initial distribution among the Federal States or Länder (EASY)⁴
3. Reporting to and accommodation in the competent reception facility
4. Personal application to the Federal Office at the arrival center in the reception facility
5. Examination of the Dublin procedure to determine whether other EU member states are responsible for examining the asylum application.
6. Personal interview at the Federal Office
7. Decision

Details and regulations connecting these stages have changed several times during the time of the “crisis.” One example is that the Dublin procedure was not in use for some months between 2015 and 2016. It was resumed after being revised in March 2016. Another example is that for people arriving after March 2016, two personal interviews are required at the Federal Office before a decision about their legal status could be made.

Figure 4: Possible Decisions in the national asylum procedure



Source: (BAMF 2016b)

4 The EASY quota system (Initial Distribution of Asylum-Seekers) is orientated in line with the “Königstein Key”. The distribution quota is calculated annually by the Federation-Länder Commission, and determines what share of asylum-seekers are received by each Federal Land, to ensure suitable, fair distribution among the Federal-states. Source: The stages of the German asylum procedure. An overview of the individual procedural steps and the legal basis (BAMF 2016c, p.9).

As the previous graphic shows, there are six possible outcomes of the asylum procedure:

- Both the acknowledgement of entitlement to asylum, and the awarding of refugee protection (Geneva Refugee Convention) result in full protection and a right for residence in the respective country for three years, unrestricted access to the labor market, and entitlement for privileged family unification of specific family members. Settlement permits are possible after 3-5 years based on other preconditions such as ability to secure a living and adequate knowledge of the German language.
- Awarding subsidiary protection results in the right for a residency of one year, which can be extended for two years at a time. Like the first two legal statuses, those who receive subsidiary protection have unrestricted access to the labor market, and settlement permits are possible after 5 years have preconditions been met. Unlike them, however, they are not entitled to family unification. The possibility to apply for family unification was suspended for two years (Leubecher&Breyton 2018).⁵ The appeal deadline for this decision is 2 weeks.
- Imposition of a national ban on (prohibition of) deportation, also known as *Duldung* or "Toleration", is issued when a person can not be returned to the country to which theoretical deportation applies. Those concerned are issued with a one-year residence permit by the immigration authorities, which can be repeatedly extended. According to this status, employment is possible if permission is given by the immigration authorities, and settlement is possible after 5 years if a list of requirements is met. No entitlement of family unification. The appeal deadline for this decision is 2 weeks.

Rejection: When an asylum application is turned down, a distinction is made between two types of rejection: outright rejection and rejection as "manifestly unfounded". In the first case, the rejected asylum applicant is set a deadline of 30 days to leave the country and has an appeal deadline of 2 weeks. In the second case, the deadline set for leaving the country is one week only, with the same possible deadline for appeal. However, in this case, the individual can temporarily suspend a return and issue a temporary suspension of deportation (*Duldung*) or a time-limited residence permit

⁵ This suspension was set until March 2018, after which family unification for asylum seekers with subsidiary protection would - theoretically- be allowed. However, family unification for people with limited protection was a major negotiation point among the German political parties involved in coalition building after the last elections in Germany. These negotiations resulted in an agreement to prolong the suspension until end of July 2018, and from August on, to allow in a maximum of 1000 family members that would be chosen based on humanitarian reasons.

if there are obstacles to return that were overlooked by the Federal Office during its decision-making process.

Syrian asylum seekers in the Asylum Procedure: a good *Bleibeperspektive*

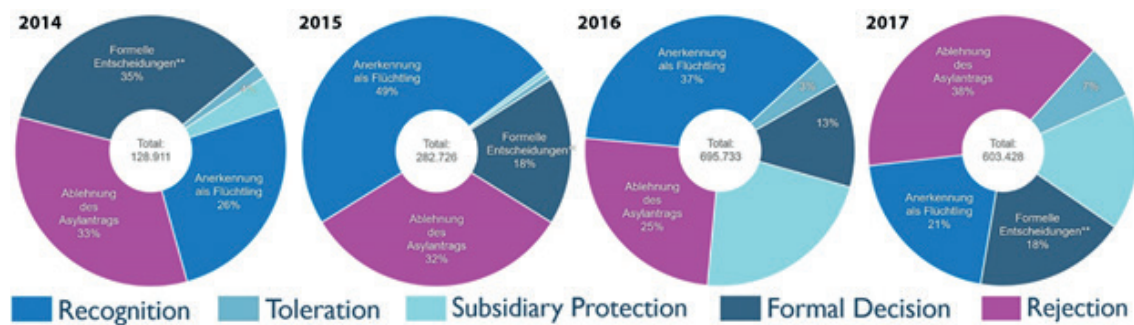
Theoretically and legally, asylum applications should be examined and decided upon on an individual basis. However, the pre-decided so-called *Bleibeperspektive* (possibility of recognition or prospects of remaining in the country) plays a central role in the length of the asylum procedure, its outcomes, and access to social welfare and integration measures, which the UNHCR encourage the EU states to implement as an important part of their commitments under the 1951 Convention (UNHCR 2007).

The *Bleibeperspektive* is a practitioners' term. It is not a legal term and does not have a legal standing. Having a good *Bleibeperspektive* means that one comes from countries with a possibility higher than 50% of being recognized and receiving full protection and with that a three-year residency permit. The categorization is made based on nationality and is revised every 6 months. In the second half of 2017, the five nationalities that had high prospects of recognition are from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Eritrea and Somalia.⁶

Having good *Bleibeperspektive* gives Syrians faster access to residency permits, Housing and the job market, German courses, integration courses, donations from volunteers and citizens' initiatives as well as the possibility of family unification as soon as one receives the residency title.

6 The *Bleibeperspektive* is decided based on passports and citizenships rather than countries of origin. For example, Kurds and Palestinian refugees from Syria are not treated like Syrian nationals in practice. Even entering Germany on the same day, and being born in the same city, a Syrian with Palestinian origin was still waiting for a decision one year after sending his asylum application and having his interview at the BAMF.

Figure 5: Change in Protection Percentages from 2014-2017

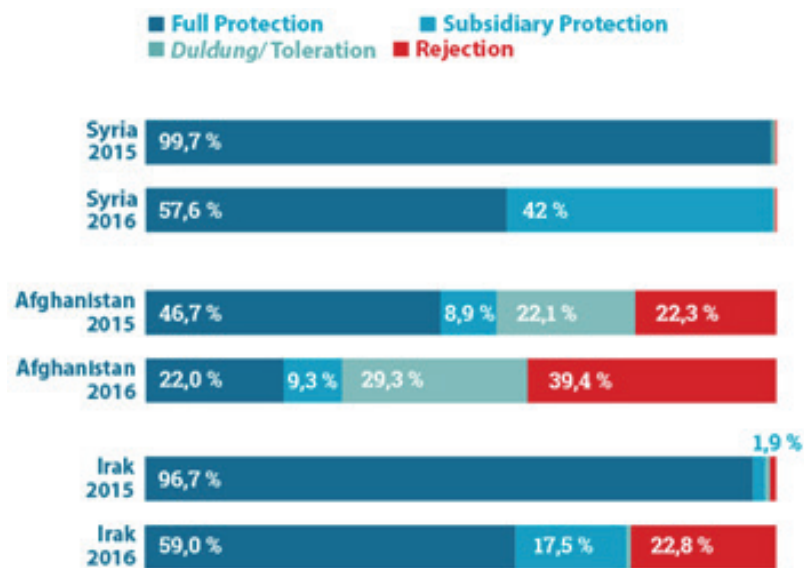


Source: translated from Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2018

The figure above shows the changes in the results and decisions of the national asylum system between 2014 and 2017. These charts are an indicator of the policies towards asylum and asylum seekers in each year. In comparison with 2014, 2015 shows a noticeable increase – from 26% to 49% in the number of asylum applications that received recognition as refugees in Germany; and a decrease in the number of asylum applications receiving subsidiary protection or a Toleration. In 2016, as hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers entered the country, recognition percentages dropped by 12% from year 2015, while they were still higher than those in 2014. The amount of applications receiving a rejection, toleration or subsidiary protection multiplied in 2016 and 2017. This increase in subsidiary protection percentages can be linked to an implicit will to limit another surge in the number of asylum seekers and refugees through family unification.

The figure below shows that the decrease in full protection, and increase in subsidiary protection, toleration and rejections also included applicants from countries that have a good Bleibeperspektive; including those from Afghanistan and Iraq. The figure also shows that Syrian asylum seekers rarely received toleration or rejection compared to other asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016.

Figure 6: Change in Issued Decisions for Asylum Applications for Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq 2015&2016



Source: translated from Pro Asyl

Duration of Asylum Procedure

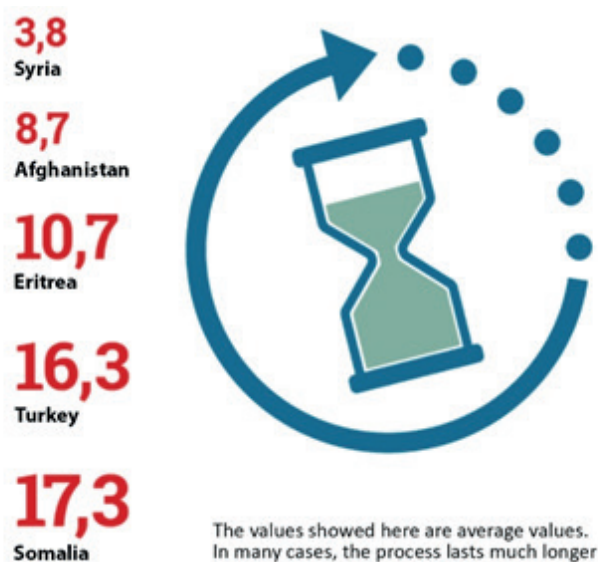
The duration of the asylum procedure in Germany has also been changing with time. This is related to both changing regulations and the number of asylum applications submitted every year. The BAMF (2016c, p.29) claims to have reduced the duration of the procedure for “individuals from specific countries of origin to only a few weeks since the summer of 2015 by applying a systematic cluster procedure.”⁷ This is done by categorizing asylum seekers into four groups before they file their applications. These categories depend on criteria like the country of origin, level of complexity expected in processing the application, and the route travelled. With this aspect, an additional benefit of the good Bleibeperspektive is the duration of asylum procedure. Figure 7 shows the difference in the average duration of asylum procedure for selected nationalities. It shows the average duration for Syrian asylum applicants to be 3.8 months in comparison for 8.7 months for Afghani asylum seekers and 17.3 months for Somalian asylum seekers.

⁷ Cluster A: Countries of origin with a high protection rate (from 50 % upwards) – or good Bleibeperspektive. Cluster B: Countries of origin with a low protection rate (up to 20 %), Cluster C: Complex cases, and Cluster D: Dublin cases.

However, in reality and with time, procedures are changed and the duration of procedures has been increasing. E.g. Syrian asylum seekers who entered the country before March 2016 were only required to have one interview at the BAMF, but those who entered after that date are required to attend two interviews during their asylum procedure. The second interview should theoretically come 4 weeks after the first interview, but in reality, many months can pass before receiving a second appointment or a legal status.

In addition to the delays in the procedure, practical aspects play an important role in the duration of the asylum process, like appointment letters being lost by the post, being sent to the wrong address-es, or having wrong names on them, which lead to many applicants missing their appointments and having to wait for new ones.

Figure 7: Average duration of Asylum Procedure for selected nationalities in months



Source: translated from Pro Asyl

Family Unification

The numbers of the Syrians or Syrian Conflict asylum seekers and refugees in Germany presented above do not represent the numbers of all Syrians who arrived. One main aspect that is missing from asylum statistics is the group of new comers through family unification visas for recognized refugees. Family members of recognized refugees can apply for visas in the German Embassy of the country of origin (if possible), or in neigh-

boring countries, like embassies in Beirut, Amman, Erbil, Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir. However, some of these embassies have such a high demand on visa appointments and are usually fully booked two years in advance. Syrian contacts from the research fieldwork reported considering having their families apply in German embassies in Sudan, Singapore or even Malaysia.

The Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany shared that overall, 105,551 residency permits to enter the country were issued in 2016 for familial reasons. This number is 28% higher than those issued for the same purpose in 2015 (BAMF 2017b, p.94). However, these numbers do not only refer to family unification concerning asylum seekers and refugees, but also to applications from German citizens.

Newspapers like focus (Focus Online 2017a) and Welt (Leubecher 2017) reported -on behalf of the Foreign Office- that between the beginning of 2015 and mid-2017, about 102,000 visas were issued in the embassies of neighboring countries for Syrian and Iraqi family members of recognized refugees in Germany. The Welt estimates that their number would reach 200-300,000 by the end of 2018.

1. Characteristics of the Syrian Conflict Intake on Arrival

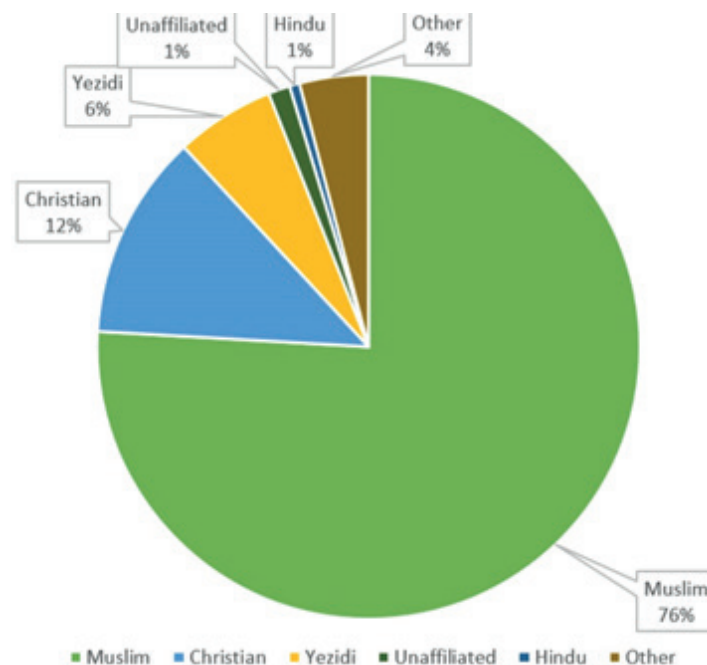
As mentioned above, most available statistics are not specific about different nationalities but for asylum seekers as a whole. One of those is the educational background. According to a survey implemented by the BAMF in 2016, 58% of adult asylum seekers spent 10 years or more in schools, high schools or vocational training, compared to 88% for local inhabitants of Germany. The survey shows that the general education of asylum seekers is highly polarized: 37% of asylum seekers had attended secondary schools, and of them 32% completed their secondary education; 31% attended middle schools, and of them 22% completed their education there; 10% visited elementary schools; 5% visited other schools and 9% did not attend any school. Of adult asylum seekers, 19% visited high schools or universities, and 13% have high school certificates; 12% have received training in either industrial education or in other training-requiring facilities, and 6% of them completed their training. Of the surveyed asylum seekers, 46% still want to have a school-leaving certificate, and 66% want to complete a high school education or vocational training in Germany.

Of the surveyed population, 73% of the surveyed (81% of men and 50% of women) between the age of 18-65 had work experience for an average of 6.4 years before they moved to Germany. From those, 30% were workers, 25% employees in a leading position and 27% were active independently. At the time of the survey, 14% were in the full

and part time workforce, independent, or in a training or in-ternship. In the group of the unemployed, 78% responded that they “definitely” wanted to work; 15% said they would “probably” want to work - 97% of men and 87% of women definitely or probably want to be active in a form of employment.⁸

As for the religious affiliation of asylum seekers, the following figure shows that the biggest religious group of asylum seekers in 2016 were Muslims, that constituted 75.9% of asylum seekers; followed by Christians at 12.2%; Yezidis at 5.9%; unaffiliated with any religion at 1,3%; Hindus at 0.6% and others at 4.1%.

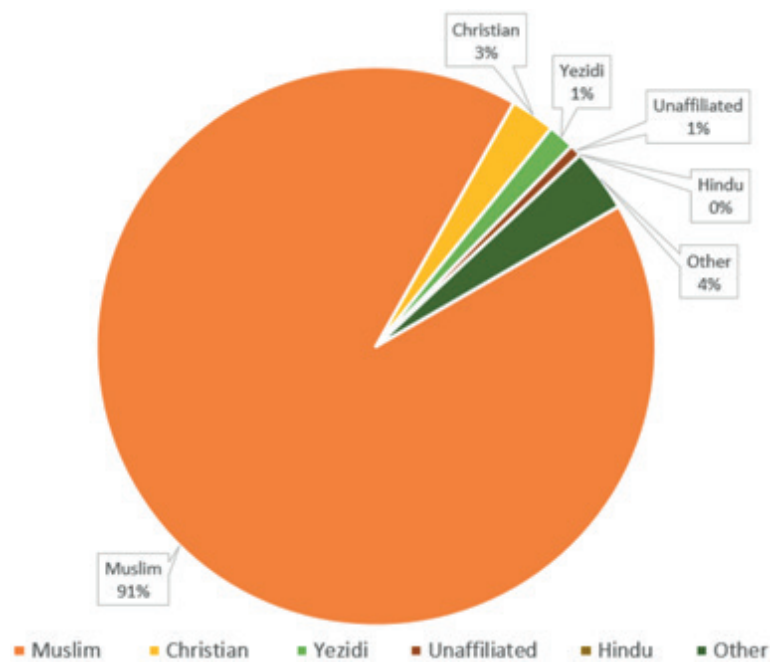
Figure 8: Religious Affiliation of Asylum Seekers in Germany in 2016



Data source: (BAMF 2017b, p.25)

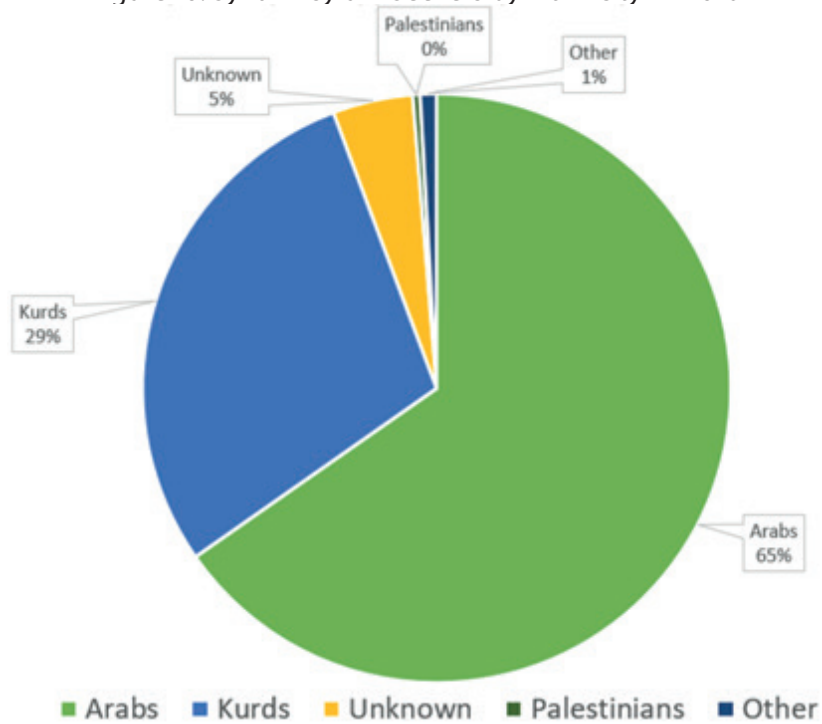
8 http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Publikationen/Forschungsberichte/fb29-iab-bamf-soep-befragung-gefluechtete.pdf?__blob=publicationFile. Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2016 IAB-BAMF-SOEP-Befragung von Geflüchteten: Überblick und erste Ergebnisse. Forschungsbericht 29

Figure 9: Syrian Asylum Seekers by Religion in 2016



Data Source: (BAMF 2017b, p.25)

Figure 10: Syrian Asylum Seekers by "Ethnicity" in 2016



Data Source: (BAMF 2017b, p.24)

Ethnic and Religious Composition of Syrian Asylum Seekers

Asylum seekers arriving from the Syrian Arab Republic are ethnically and religiously diverse. In 2016, of the 266,250 Syrian asylum seekers, the ethnic majority were ethnic Arabs at 65.3% of applicants, followed by Kurds constituting 29%. For the same year, the biggest religious group of Syrian asylum seekers were Muslims at 91.5%; followed by Christians at 2.6%, then Yezidis at 1.5% (BAMF 2017b, p.25).

2. Response by Authorities on Arrival

Germany has been taking in refugees and asylum seekers for several decades. The most recent intake started with the opening of the borders in the Summer of 2015 and continues on to the present (in much smaller numbers). This was the first intake of its kind in terms of the numbers of non-European populations allowed in. The impression given through the media after the arrival of asylum seekers was that the majority of the new comers are here to stay, and that they could serve as a solution for the ageing country and its demographic problem. This was reflected in the public demands for faster decision-making processes in asylum procedures, allowing people to attend educational institutions -as guest listeners- and receiving work permits 3 months after their arrival, and regardless of their legal status.⁹

As the German asylum procedure requires, people are sent to the nearest emergency reception centre when they arrive to the country. These centres register asylum seekers and distribute them to the different federal states based on the EASY quota system mentioned above. When asylum seekers arrive in the federal states, they are distributed to the different communities, cities and towns. There, they arrive mostly in collective housing facilities (prepared and organized by the receiving community) that should accommodate them until they receive a legal status and/or find housing.

Federal states are responsible for distributing and financing asylum seekers; and most of the implantation, reception, accommodation, and integration of asylum seekers is managed by the hosting communities at the local level and by local actors.

In the highly decentralized German system, federal states (Länder) have their own regulations, capabilities, demography, incomes and finances, housing-, and job markets. These aspects are not only different for the different Länder, but also between

⁹ This is the formal response by authorities, but not a statement about the success of these responses in practice.

rural and urban communities, and even within the same locality. Housing markets, real estate and land availability as well as financial resources play a central role in the types of accommodations of asylum-seekers (Seethaler-Wari, 2018).

The number of people arriving constituted the biggest challenge in the beginning. Federal states, but especially localities and communities were overwhelmed with the need for fast responses and solutions to accommodate the numbers arriving in a short time. The focus in the beginning was on putting a “roof over their heads” and providing for their basic existential needs. Later on, and as the numbers of arrivals sank, authorities had the chance to “breathe” and think about following steps like housing, jobs, integration, and so on.

Because of the differences between the different states and localities, it is not possible to generalize about what worked and what did not work; solutions and decisions made by the different authorities on the federal, regional or local levels brought different results for different people. Solutions that fit some communities might not fit others, and those that fit some asylum seekers might not suit others.

3. Response by NGOs, Religious and Community Organizations, Corporates, Professional organizations, Others.

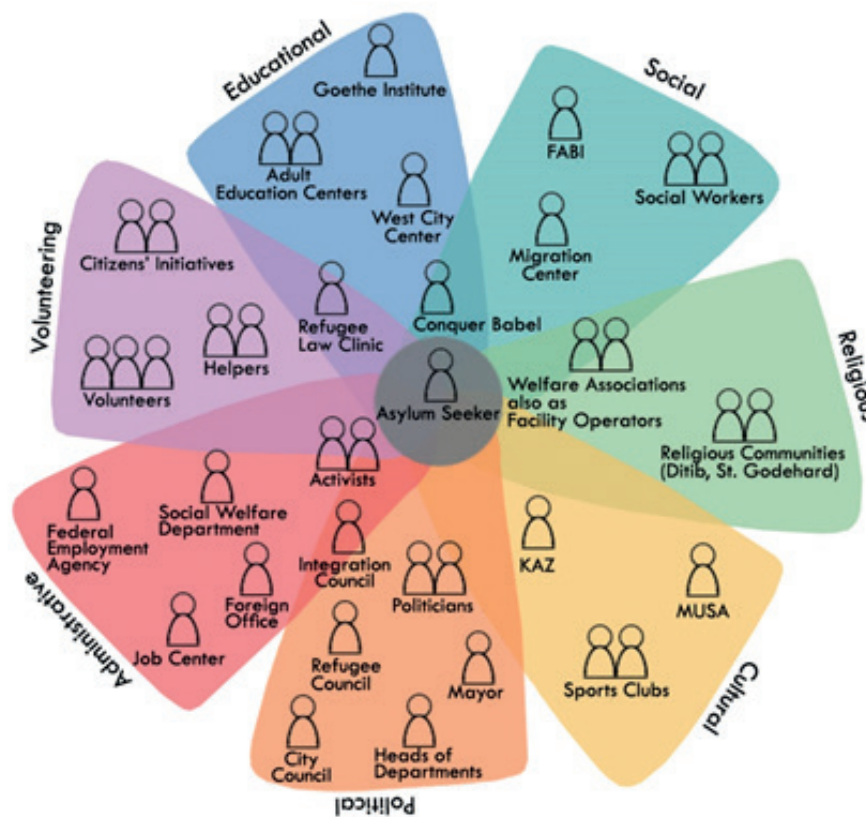
NGOs, religious and community organizations have also been playing an important role as local actors. They offer different kinds and levels of help, support and donations to asylum-seekers in their settling-in phase and in their daily lives. New initiatives, networks and NGOs offer (informally and free of charge) legal advice, translation services, accompanying services to authorities and other institutions, German classes, and help with German bureaucracy. Additional groups and initiatives appeared on the internet (on the national, state or local levels) to provide information, organize activities and support asylum-seekers. People gathering donations or looking for offers and activities to match their contacts among asylum-seekers or asylum-seekers on those websites with whatever they need. About one third of the German population has been involved in different acts of volunteering and donating to support newcomers (Brunner&Rietzschel 2016). However, and here too, the Bleibeperspektive plays a role in access to support, help and donations. Asylum seekers with a better Bleibeperspektive, especially those from Syria and Iraq, were often considered a priority by the volunteers, civilian initiatives, and private people that our project encountered in the field. They were the main and -sometimes the exclusive- target for offered activities, German classes, and donations. Naturally, this “special treatment” resulted in increased

competition and frictions in the relationships among other asylum seekers of diverse backgrounds living in the same collective accommodations.

The different histories, backgrounds and structures of/in the different localities result in different actors on the local level to be involved in refugee accommodation and work. Therefore, the roles that actors like NGOs, community organizations, religious communities and volunteers take on are different in their functions and dominant in different communities and localities. In addition to the German Red Cross and the Johanniter in Göttingen, five other charity organizations together established a collective organization – Bonveno – which serves as a major operator of many refugee accommodations in the city. This organization is, therefore, an important actor that is unique for the city of Göttingen. The city has another specificity in the fact that all of its accommodations are managed by charity or public entities like the city itself, which is a big difference from a city like Wolfsburg whose accommodations are mostly managed by private firms.

The research project “diversity of asylum-seekers’ needs and aspirations”, implemented at the Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, mapped the diversity of institutional actors in the city, describing the roles and activities of local actors involved with asylum seekers. Taking this city as a case study reflects the diversity of actors and gives an idea of the complexity of their responses to refugee intake on the local level in the German case. Therefore, and based on the findings of this project, a short description of the local actors encountered in Göttingen follows.

Figure 11: Diversity of Local Institutional Actors in Göttingen, 2016



Source: (Vertovec et al 2017, p.20)

The Diversity of Local Actors

Asylum-seekers and refugees encounter diverse actors in their everyday life – especially at the local level. The institutional actors they encounter include members and representatives of governmental and non-governmental, public or private institutions. These actors and their institutions offer different services in the fields of legal status, social work, and educational and cultural services. They help in access to the housing market, labor market or language classes, and come from different organizational backgrounds with different expertise, motivations, tasks, budgets, structures, networks, work styles and implementation strategies, each of which affect their work with asylum-seekers. As the figure above shows, actors come from different state: administrative and political, and non-state: cultural, social, religious, or educational backgrounds. They offer services that correspond to their areas of expertise through their institutional positions in primary government care, through their non-profit organiza-

tions or through voluntary help, which covered a huge gap of needs in Germany in the peak years of refugee reception and accommodation (2015-2017).

Representing a bewildering array of welcome helpers, the diversity of local actors is quite confusing from the central perspective of a newly arrived asylum-seeker. Many asylum-seekers were at a loss to identify who is who; who can offer what kind of help; and who belongs to the government (or more importantly, who could influence an asylum application outcome). This confusion caused some distress to newcomers, who treated every actor as a real player in the outcome of their asylum application. The graphic above depicts the range of over thirty institutional actors in Göttingen with whom an asylum-seeker might interact, categorized by fields of activity/responsibility.¹⁰

4. Public and political discourses and responses to Syrian refugee intake

Two parallel response lines appeared towards the refugee intake in Germany since the beginning of the “crisis” (e.g. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2017). One positive line of response was expressed in the “Willkommenskultur” or welcoming culture that took upon itself to show the “human face” of Europe and Germany, especially as a response to the tragic images of the suffering of asylum seekers, their waiting at the borders, and the thousands that drowned in the Mediterranean on their way to Europe. This line was visible in the media coverage and the high engagement of locals in volunteering and supporting initiatives and activities. The second line of response, which was negative, presented a sceptic, fearful, anti-immigrant dimension that developed after the crisis into stronger support of right-wing nationalistic movements like Pegida¹¹ and the AfD,¹² and indicated a change in perception of refugees by the German public (e.g. *Focus Online* 2017b).

The mass media mostly supported the first response line at the beginning of the crisis (e.g. *BILD-Zeitung* 2017, *Die Welt* 2017). Some studies looked more closely at the developments and challenges of this phenomenon (e.g. Bertelsmann Stiftung 2015).

10 More details on the research findings and the detailed services of these actors can be found in the project report (Vertovec et al 2017, p.20).

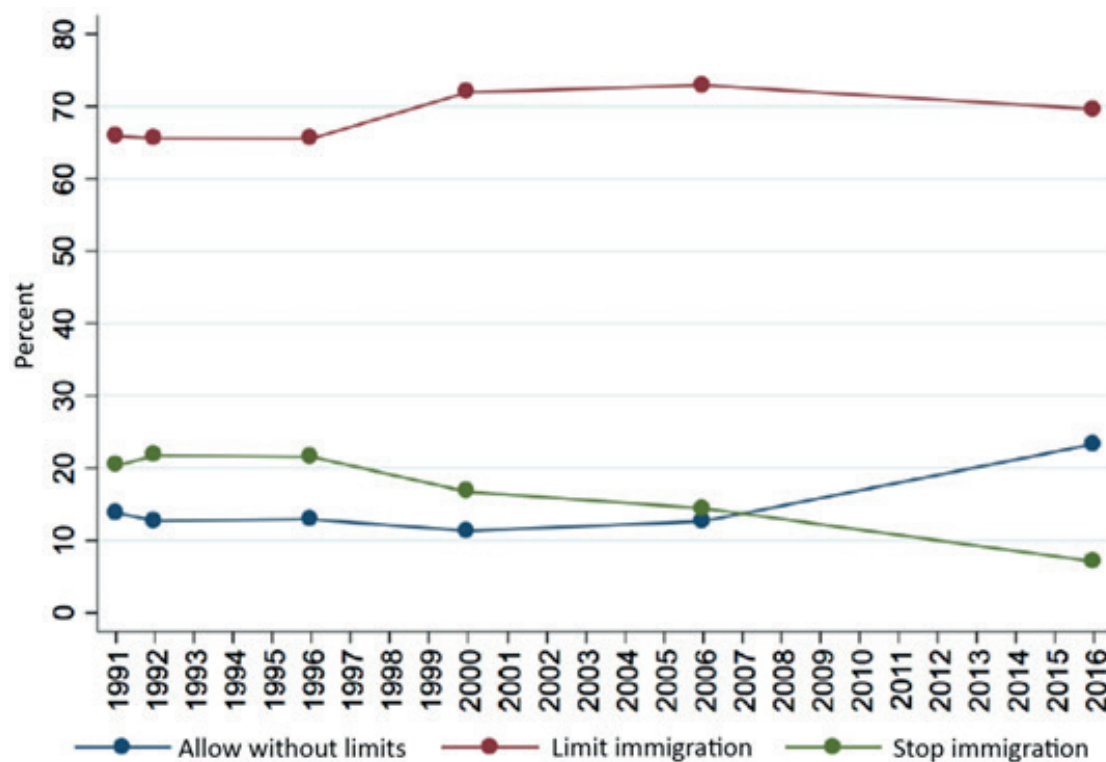
11 Pegida or Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West is a German nationalist, anti-Islam, far-right political movement established in Dresden in Saxony, October 2014

12 Alternative for Germany (German: Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) is a right-wing to far-right political party in Germany, founded in April 2013.

However, a more recent study by the Bertelsmann Institute shows that the public discourse was not changed much by the 2015 refugee intake. Figure 12 for example was published in January 2018 (Helbling & Strijbis 2018). It shows the opinion change between 1991 and 2016 about immigration of asylum seekers and refugees to Germany in percentages. It shows that the majority of Germans has consistently been for limiting immigration through asylum seekers for decades.

However, there has been an increase in the percentage of locals who support unlimited numbers of asylum seekers entering the country, and a decrease in the percentage of those who support a complete halt of immigration of asylum seekers.

Figure 12: Public opinion change about immigration of asylum seekers to Germany 1991-2016



Source: translated from (Helbling & Strijbis 2018, p.22)

Although AfD and Pegida were established before the asylum-seeker main intake, their supporters and followers increased dramatically after opening the borders, and events related to asylum seekers,¹³ making the second response line stronger and

¹³ Examples of this are the world-famous New Year's Eve 2015/2016 events in Cologne, and some terrorist attacks in Europe and Germany that were either implemented or planned by asylum seekers or migrants in 2016 and 2017.

louder than before the intake.¹⁴ The AfD that had missed the 5% electoral threshold to enter the Bundestag during the 2013 federal election, became the third largest party in Germany after the 2017 federal election. It received 12.6% after the CDU (32.9% - down from 41.5% in 2013) and the SPD (20.5% - down from 25.7% in 2013); and it is now represented in 14 of the 16 German federal state parliaments.

Despite this increase in the support for the right-wing nationalist political party, its supporters remain a criticized minority today. And, despite the fact that right-wing, Pegida and pro-AfD demonstrations attracted higher numbers of followers in 2015 and 2016, anti-Pegida, anti-AfD, and anti-nazi demonstrations started attracting even higher numbers that meant to demonstrate that right-wing followers are not a majority. However, the huge drop in the percentage of followers of established parties like the CDU and SPD and the increase in support for the AfD caused the “refugee crisis” to dominate the political discourse about refugees and migration; this was the main theme of political debates.

5. Settlement location

As explained above, asylum-seekers are distributed from emergency centres based on the EASY quota system and the “Königsteiner Schlüssel”, which determines the percentage of asylum-seekers that every federal state should receive. This quota is based on the federal state’s tax intake and demographic composition and is revised annually.

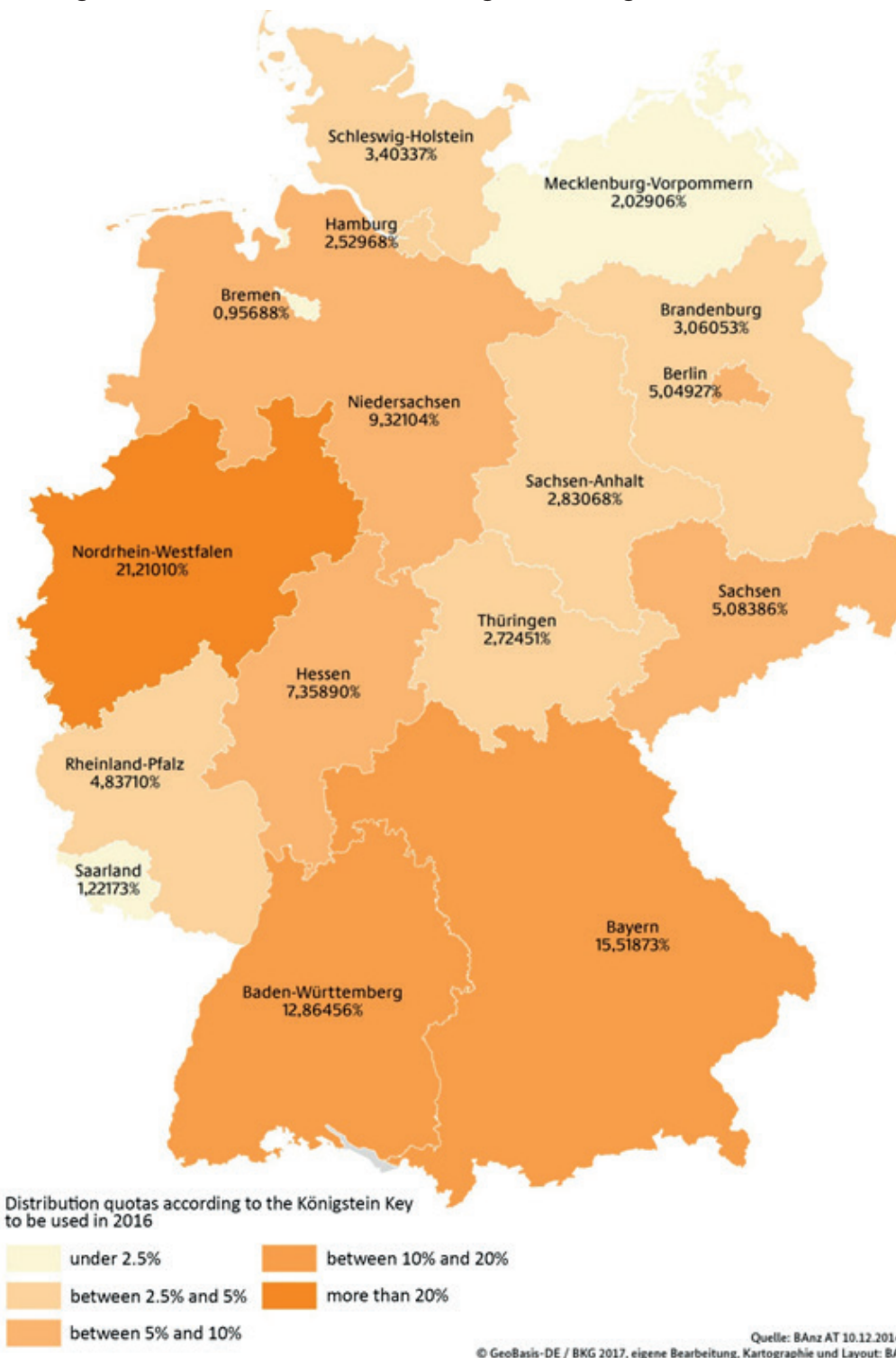
While in the beginning, asylum-seekers reported being asked whether they have family connections or social networks in specific communities so that they would possibly be assigned there, the priority is determined based on the capacity of the federal states. In general, the eastern part of Germany has a lower percentage of migrants, due to historical developments, and the fact that most guest workers that were recruited by West Germany ended up residing in that part.

This quota system aims at a fair distribution to share the financial and demographic “burden” of new comers needing social help, at least in the first months. Additionally, the system aims at avoiding concentrations of specific nationalities in specific cities and the creation of ghettos, or parallel societies, that are harder to integrate in the general population. Despite this, the distribution of migrants and refugees in Germany shows some concentration of specific nationalities in specific areas. For example, in

14 These events also played a role in increasing media reporting of negative stories about refugees, and to criticize the way the system dealt with the crisis.

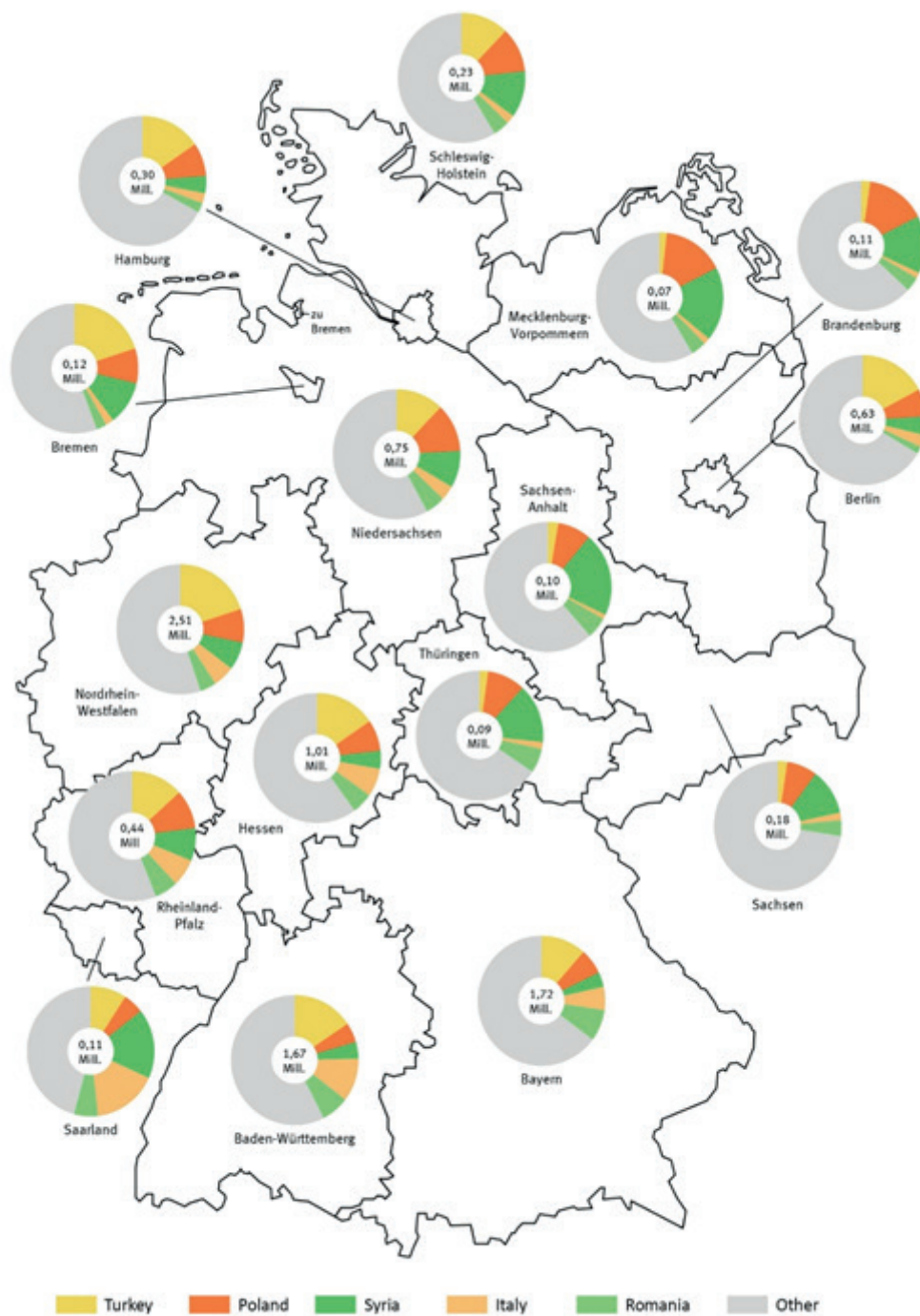
the north and northeast of the country the number of Syrians is higher within the migrant populations of that area than other nationalities as the following figures show.

Figure 13: Distribution Quotas according to the Königsteiner Schlüssel in 2016



Source: translated from (BAMF 2017b, p.17)

Figure 14: Foreign populations in German districts by selected nationalities, 2016



Quelle: Ausländerzentralregister

Statistisches Bundesamt, Fachserie 1 Reihe 2, 2016

2017 - 06 - 06/54

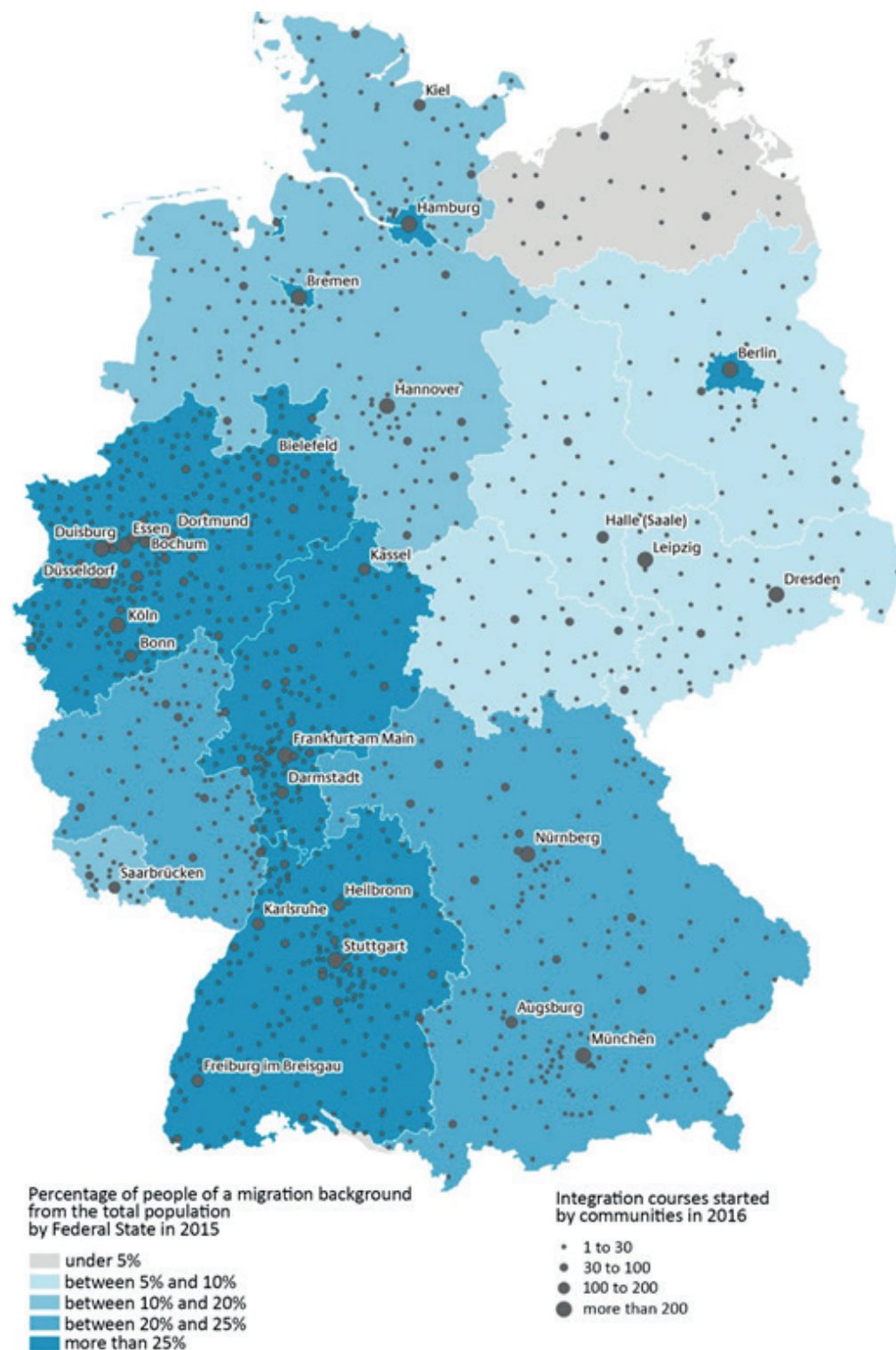
Source: (BAMF 2017b, p.10)

6. Post arrival programs and policies

After arrival, different policies aimed at accommodation and integration were implemented in the different federal states. Some key aspects of daily life and their outcomes are presented below:

- Access to accommodation: Asylum seekers are accommodated in a wide variety of types of central-ized and decentralized accommodations. Recognized asylum seekers are allowed to leave the centres between 3 months – 4 years after their arrival (based on the respective federal state). Those with higher prospects to remain can leave before receiving a legal status if they can find housing. However, lack of social and decentralized housing, as well as lack of will to rent to refugees result in many asylum seekers living in refugee accommodations for years before being able to leave.
- Access to information on rights and obligations of the status granted: Most information; personal and by post are given in German; translators exist at most institutions, or as volunteers, but trust lacks in many exchanges based on the ethnicity, political orientation or religious confession of the translator. Therefore, many people have lack of access to information.
- Possibility of family reunification: Only in the case of 3-year residency, recognized refugees and asylum seekers have a claim to family unification. The families back home or in third countries have to wait for an appointment in the German embassy closest to them, which takes many months if not years, depriving many of normality in their lives with their families, and extending their fear for the wellbeing of their family members outside Germany.
- Travel documentation and freedom of movement. Based on the Königsteiner Schlüssel, asylum seekers are allocated to states and communities based on a quota system. Some federal states employ a Wohnsitzauflage, where refugees are not allowed to leave the accommodation or the community they are assigned to, or move outside the federal state before 3 years, unless they have proof of education or jobs in other states. Asylum seekers can travel for short periods of time in coordination with their accommodation management.
- Access to integration: All recognized refugees are obligated to take German and integration courses until level B1. This is also the level after which they are allowed to find a job or a vocational training. Those without recognition or with lower Bleibeperspektive who want to learn the language can only get courses through differently-qualified volunteers, usually without certification.

Figure 15: Integration Courses started in 2016 by District



Source: (BAMF 2017b, p.126)

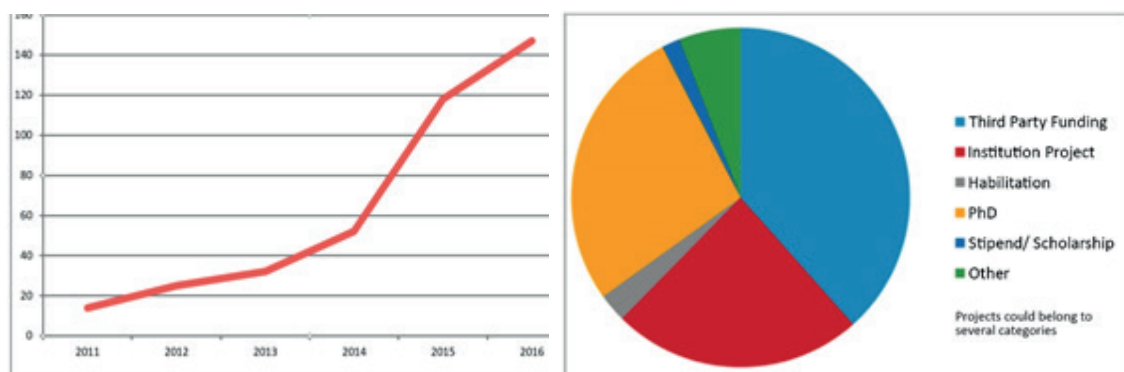
- Access to employment and self-employment: Theoretically, every asylum seeker can receive a work permit 3 months after entering the country. However, without a stable residency permit, employers are reluctant to take on or invest in asylum seekers whose remaining prospects in the country are not clear.
- Access to education and procedure for recognition of qualifications: Schooling is obligatory for minors and therefore all children must go to school. Accommodation management offices have the responsibility of registering and administering the process of registering children in schools. For adults who want to work in their training or education fields, recognition of qualifications is complicated when comparing the German education and training systems with those abroad. Most asylum seekers would need additional training or vocational training to be recognized. However, this is decided by a Sachbearbeiter, or clerk in the city who would authorize the process, or decide whether it would be financially supported. Sometimes this follows arbitrary and personal decisions of the clerks.
- Social welfare: Asylum seekers in Germany receive social welfare from the city, and from the job centre after being recognized. The amounts of monthly payments increase after their recognition and is based on the family size. The amounts may vary monthly when cuts are made for services like the integration courses. Additionally, asylum seekers receive a maximum amount for rent, and a one-time amount for furniture when they move to their own apartment. The size and rent also depend on the family size. Local actors and volunteers usually help with the costs and ways of moving and with donations.
- Health care: Asylum seekers are health insured and receive health care, mainly through the management offices of their accommodations. This is for those who reside in accommodations and especially due to their need for translators for their medical appointments. Others organize their doctor appointments on their own, and seek volunteers who would accompany them to translate.
- Possibility of assistance for voluntary repatriation: a number of packages exist to assist those who would like to leave the country voluntarily. This is by paying their travel costs and providing them with an amount of money to start over in their country of origin. These packages were not implemented in the case of Syria in 2016 despite the fact that they were possible for those from Afghanistan and Iraq. However, and since the end of 2017, Syria joined the list of countries to which repatriation is possible and Syrians who would like to return home now receive state support. Germany also supports programs of re-integration in the countries of origin where returning asylum seekers can get support locally to reintegrate into

their societies (Schneider&Kreienbrink 2010). The kind and amount of assistance offered depends on the nationality and legal status of the returnee at the time of their application to withdraw their asylum application or cancel their residency permit.

7. Research into Syrian conflict intake

Research related to asylum, asylum seekers and refugees has considerably increased in Germany since 2013. New migration and refugee related networks and task forces were established and new master thesis, PhD dissertations and Post Doc researches were increasingly concentrating on themes closely related to the refugee intake. The recently created website “Flight: Research and Reflection” (IMIS & BICC 2018), for example, offers an interactive map which shows the locations and summaries of current research projects related to flight and asylum in Germany. A policy paper and a publication from the network of refugee studies¹⁵ summarizes that the most financed research projects were those focusing on 1) integration and participation, 2) national refugee policy, 3) refugee policy on local and community level and 4) education and job market. Further important themes include experience of violence, the international protection regime, migration routes, borders, return and deportation, and causes of flight. The majority of the research has a particular reference to Germany or to Western Europe.

Figure 16: Number of Refugee-Research Projects started and Project Distribution by type



Source: (Kleist 2017, p.2)

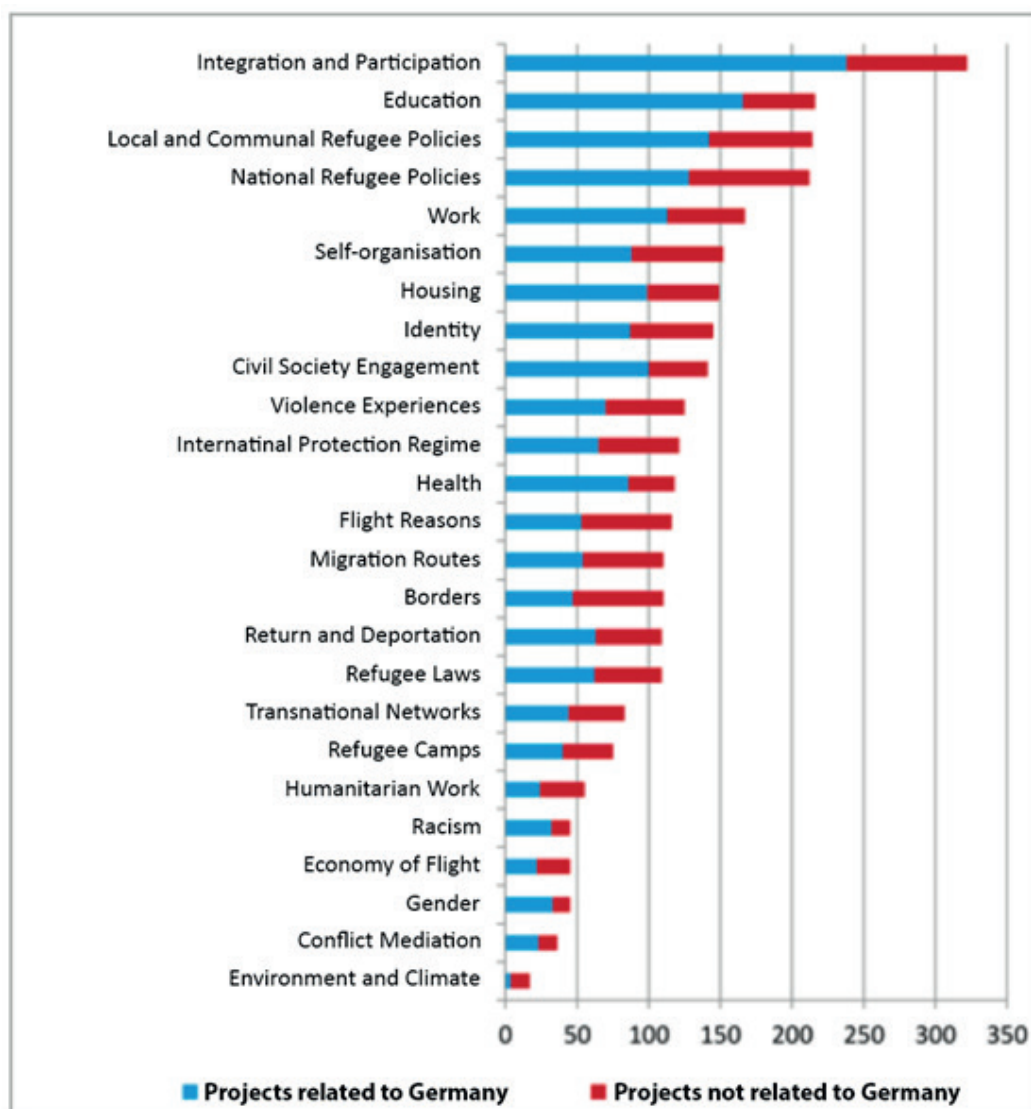
Source: translated from (Kleist 2018, p.28)

Research into the specific group: Syrian asylum seekers and refugees formulates only a small percentage of current research. Some of this research is done by the BAMF in

¹⁵ In German: Netzwerk Flüchtlingsforschung. It was renamed in 2018 to Netzwerk Fluchtforschung.

the form of reports and statistics. The following map shows the locations and numbers of the 11 documented research projects focusing on Syrian asylum seekers (from a total of 593 projects). However, these projects are diverse, and do not all deal with Syrian refugees in Germany, but also in other countries like Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon. They deal with issues like histories and biographies of flight, violence, gender and humanitarian protection regimes. Most of these projects are carried out at German universities for PhD dissertations or at re-search institutions. Recommendations of prepared reports about the current state of research how-ever, call for further funding for multidisciplinary research projects that can integrate several themes, disciplines and perspectives about refugee-related research to reach more holistic results and com-prehensive findings.

Figure 17: Implemented Refugee-Research Themes with and without relation to Germany, 2018



(Kleist 2018, p.24)

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