Syrian newcomers in Brazil: the challenges for setting long-term goals[1]

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1. Introduction: In 2013, Brazil was one of the few countries that accepted the legal entry of Syrian newcomers. Until 2019, around 3,768 Syrians came to Brazil with a humanitarian visa. Once they claimed refugee status in Brazil, they received a work permit and were able to open a bank account and access the education and healthcare system. However, the government did not provide them with language classes or technical/training courses. Consequently, these services were provided by NGOs and faith-based organizations. This paper addresses the centrality of work for Syrian newcomers in Brazil. Thus, I analyze the challenges they face to find a job or set up a business. Qualitative methods are adopted, consisting of interviews with Syrian newcomers, resettlement professionals and the Syrian-Lebanese community members. The analysis is based on an extensive literature review: the established Syrian-Lebanese community in Brazil, "transnationalism", "social capital", "ethnic economies", and "ethnic entrepreneurship". The results show that learning Portuguese, recognizing their diplomas, finding a job and setting up a business are the biggest challenges they face. Few Syrians are working in jobs related to their former jobs in Syria. Moreover, the majority of them are self-employed, which frequently equals precarious work. On the one hand, the results show that Syrians are willing to work hard in order to make their living, because they do not like to live on charity. On the other hand, few Syrians are thriving in the job market. As a result, most of our interviewees are uncertain about their future in

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Brazil. In summary, I suggest that finding a job is very important for their dignity and to make future plans in Brazil.

2. Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were combined for this research. Statistics were relevant for providing a profile of these refugees in São Paulo. On the other hand, qualitative methods consisted of carrying out semi-structured interviews with Syrians in a refugee situation (n=17). Qualitative methods provided information about several issues concerning their everyday lives, especially their adaptation to the country, but also major aspects like housing and working conditions, leisure time, access to social policies and public services, sociability and the production of the otherness. The interviews were also addressed to resettlement professionals (n=8) from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and with the Syrian-Lebanese community members (n=7). This was complementary information for studying their adaptation to the country.

I conducted snowball sampling of interviewees. The interviews were carried out only after I obtained "informed consent" from participants. I maintained the confidentiality and privacy of participants: names were not disclosed and pseudonyms were used. The data analysis was based on the constructive approach of the Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006).

3. Research Questions

- What networks and occupational choices facilitate and/or constrain Syrian newcomers' access to the job market or to set up a business?

- What individual and/or collective strategies emerge in the face of growing precarity?

4. The Syrians in a refugee situation in Brazil

On the 24th of September 2013, the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE) adopted Normative Resolution No. 17, which enabled Syrians in a refugee situation to enter the country with a common visa and, then, seek refugee status in the Brazilian territory. This resolution remained in effect until 2019, when it was not extended anymore. Moreover, from 2013 to 2015 they were dismissed from the interview in which they had to prove that they had a "well-founded fear of being persecuted"[3].

As the graph bellow shows, most Syrians are young men, from 20 to 34 years old. Moreover, the data shows that the majority are single, well-educated and Muslim Sunnis (Adus, 2016; Ipea, 2017; Observatory, 2018).

Graph 1 – Age groups of Syrian refugees in Brazil

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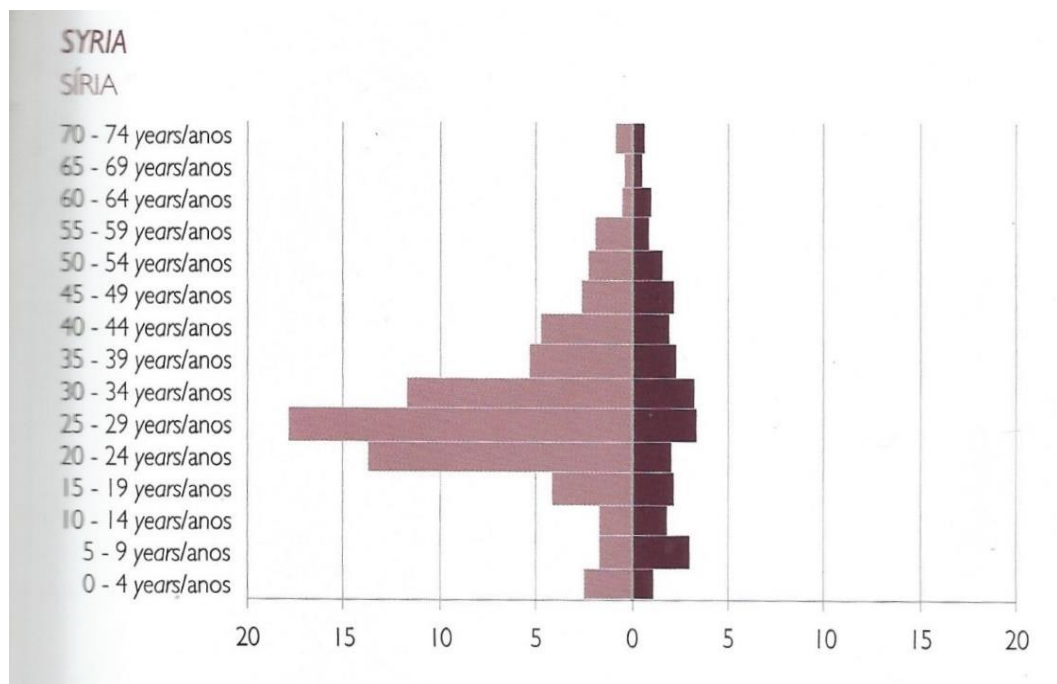
[3] Source: 1951 Convetion relating to the status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Available on: <http://www.refugeelegalaidinformation.org/1951-convention>

Source: National Registration System for Foreigners/ Federal Police – Brazilian Ministry of Justice/ Project MT Brazil/ICMPD/PUCMinas/OBMigra- Ministry of Labor. Observatory of Migration in São Paulo – NEPO/UNICAMP-Fapesp/CNPq (apud OBSERVATORY, 2018, p. 185).

According to IPEA (2017), 73% of Syrians are Men and 27% Women. Moreover, 65% of men and 40% of women are single. Finally, 26% of them hold a bachelor's degree and 37% a high school diploma. (IPEA, 2017; Observatory, 2018). According to Baeninger (2017), the majority are in their working life, which shows the relevance of employment for their re-settlement.

5. Arriving in Brazil: the role of transnational networks

According to Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992, p. ix), "transnationalism" is "the emergence of a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders".

Among the interviewees I found two groups: those who had pre-arrival transnational networks (n=6) and those who did not (n=11). The first group chose to come to Brazil because it has been one of the few countries that accepted the legal entry of Syrians. Therefore, thousands chose to come here instead of risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea, or living in neighbouring countries, such as Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. The second group chose Brazil because they had relatives (n=4), acquaintances (n=5) or religious transnational networks[4] (n=2). The results show that relatives and religious organizations were more supportive of Syrian newcomers than acquaintances.

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[4] Some priests and sheiks in Syria keep social networks with sheiks and priests in Brazil from the same religious group. Hence, some Syrians in a refugee situation relied on those networks to come to Brazil. By the time they arrived in Brazil, those priests or sheiks provided them with social networks that helped them to find a house and/or a job.

At least two interviewees who relied on acquaintances complained that they promised they would have good jobs in Brazil. However, when they arrived in Brazil, they found those were low-skilled, underpaid jobs. Hence, they were subject to labour exploitation.

Those who did not have pre-arrival transnational networks were exploring the streets of São Paulo, speaking English and making new friends by chance that way:

> "*So, in the beginning when I arrived to Brazil, to São Paulo, actually I need to discover each place, each, station, so I was spending my whole day just to go out from station and take a bus, discover the streets, discover the places. I wanted to see the people […] And, I met some good friends on events. And sometimes by coincidence, on the streets. It's like a coincidence. By chance.*"
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> (Omar, Syrian in a refugee situation, English teacher)

Even though Omar did not have pre-arrival transnational networks, he found a formal job in a good company. I share Omar's story in the following paragraph:

> "*I found a job, a good job in [name of the company] […] My job supposed to go with the international team with another project. […] When I came back to São Paulo, they started to send me with an international team in the first time, to Saudi Arabia. And they couldn't, because Saudi Arabia, they refused my passport. I am a Syrian. They tried twice to Saudi Arabia and they couldn't. […] They tried to send me to Germany and [the] German government refused my visa, because I'm a Syrian. […] I was in Brazil, yeah. So, they tried to Norway, the third country, and they refused, because they think in this way. They said: "maybe he will come to this country and he will [be] stuck here in the country. He will never come back to Brazil. […] So, my project manager, he was very sad about my situation. […] So, they terminated*

my contract, after four months, just because I'm a Syrian. So, for me it was funny and sad in the same time. Sad, I lost my job, this is one of my dream, to be in [name of the company]." (Omar, 35 years old, Syrian newcomer, 4 years in Brazil, English teacher)

Omar's story leads us to the idea of globalization of Saskia Sassen (2010). According to Sassen, in global cities, such as São Paulo, local and global economies are interconnected. In order to have a formal job in that company, Omar was supposed to join an international team. However, almost all countries were suspicious of Syrian refugees. Hence, he could not pursue a formal job in São Paulo. He found an alternative becoming an English teacher. However, not every Syrian living in Brazil have the same English skills than Omar.

Moreover, Omar was not the only Syrian that had difficulty in obtaining a formal job in Brazil. Learning Portuguese, recognizing diplomas and obtaining a formal job were the main barriers that Syrians faced in Brazil. Only 3 Syrians out of 17 were working in a formal job by the time I interviewed them. Some of them were even unemployed:

"[...] even if I'm still not succeed until now, I'm not succeed at work. Even I don't succeed in my language until now, my Portuguese, I'm sorry as you can see. [...] Yeah, you know, men as me and you. When we are stable in work, you can handle a lot of things. But if you are not stable at work, you cannot think and do anything. [...] You if don't have money, if you're not stable in life, you cannot do all of these dreams. Whatever. And this is exactly now what's happening to me, I cannot focus in studying, I cannot sleep well, I cannot wake up. Even my mind. When you ask me, I'm not like organized, my thoughts." (Aziz, Syrian in a refugee situation who was unemployed)

Moreover, Brazil was facing an economic crisis[5] and, in December 2018 there were 12,2 million unemployed[6] people in the country, or 11,6% of its population (IBGE, 2019). In face of the growing precarity in the job market, they decided to join "ethnic economies" (Light, 2005) and "ethnic entrepreneurship" (Rath, 2000; Martinelli, 2014). "Ethnic economies permit immigrants and ethnic minorities to reduce disadvantage and exclusion, negotiating the terms of their participation in the general labor market from a position of greater strength" (Light, 2005, p. 650)

Usually, newcomers relied on informal, low-skilled, underpaid jobs in furniture and clothes stores. Those jobs were usually offered by the established Syrian-Lebanese community. The first flow of Syrian and Lebanese people in Brazil started in the 1880's. The majority were Christians immigrants of rural background looking for better economic opportunities. In Brazil, they became economically successful as peddlers selling goods in faraway places of Brazil. They spread across the countryside in order to find new markets, as the market in big city centers had reached saturation point. Moreover, they innovated by offering credit to their customers. They were of rural background and they did not have experience as sellers. However, in Brazil they realized they were urban people, very talented for commerce. Consequently, they became shopkeepers and storekeepers, then wholesalers and, finally, industrialists. The second generation of the Syrian-Lebanese community benefited from the economic success of the first generation. Therefore, they became bachelors who enrolled mainly in the São Francisco Law School. In this university, they found a promising environment to make social contacts. Later, as a result, they became part of the political establishment, which enabled them to gain more power. (Truzzi, 2009)

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[5] The economic crisis only got worse after the effects of the pandemics, in 2020.
[6] According to the IBGE's methodology, only people looking for a job are considered unemployed.

Hence, the established Syrian-Lebanese community had the means to be supportive of Syrian newcomers. Those "dense ties" (Coleman, 1988a apud Portes, 1998) which linked newcomers to the established Syrian community facilitated their access to the "ethnic economy" and "entrepreneurship". However, some Syrians complained about having no autonomy and/or being subject of labor exploitation. I analyzed two career paths in which newcomers decided to learn Portuguese as a strategy to overcome the lack of autonomy. In one case Ali went to a public high school, and in other case Samir went to a language school in which he found a Portuguese teacher. In both cases, they not only learned Portuguese, but also made Brazilian friends. Hence, they established "weak ties": "[…] those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive." (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1371). Taking advantage of "weak ties", Ali started working for a Brazilian in a sandwich store, and Samir as an English teacher in the school in which he learned Portuguese. In both cases, after working a while for Brazilians, they were hired again by the established Syrian-Lebanese community. However, in this time they were offered formal job. Ali started working in the kitchen of a Syrian institution and Samir in a religious Arab institution.

Interviewees also relied on "ethnic entrepreneurship" (Rath, 2000; Martinelli, 2014) in order to overcome the lack of access to the formal job market. They set up small businesses, such as electronic goods stores, restaurants or food trucks, English schools, laundry and tailor. Those are business who require lower legal (bureaucracy), cultural and financial barriers to entry (Martinelli, 2014). As an example, Syrians do not need to learn how to cook different dishes when setting up an Arab restaurant or food truck.

6. Conclusion

In summary, Syrians are facing growing precarity in the job market. Hence, they have difficulty in making future plans in Brazil. Living one day at a time is the main strategy they adopt in order to deal with uncertainty. Syrians are actively looking for opportunities, such as when they become self-employed, set up a business and learn Portuguese. Thus, "[…] their act of moving illustrates refusal to live in such conditions and introduces waiting and hope for the possibility to return or to re-create a better life elsewhere." (HORST; GRABSKA 2015, p. 2).

To some extent, the networks with the established Syrian community facilitate their access to ethnic economies and entrepreneurship. As a consequence, they were supportive of newcomers. However, in the long run those networks constrain their autonomy and access to a formal job. Those Syrians who did not have pre-arrival transnational networks were in a position in which they had to establish social connection earlier than those who relied on relatives, acquaintances, and religious networks. On the one hand, they had less support in the beginning. On the other hand, they became independent earlier than those who relied in pre-arrival transnational networks. In some cases, the established Syrian-Lebanese community was preventing newcomers of establishing "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973) with Brazilians. The decision of learning Portuguese was a turning point in the trajectories of those newcomers who relied on "dense ties" (Coleman, 1988a apud Portes, 1998). Setting up long-term goals in Brazil was easier when they learned Portuguese and established "weak ties". As a conclusion, they are more willing to stay in Brazil than those who did not establish "weak ties".

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