From Destination to Transit Stop: Syrian Migrants Revising Their Dreams in Japan

Mohammed al-Masri[1]

Abstract

Migration to unusual destinations, including Japan, has become a significant phenomenon for hundreds of Syrian (forced) migrants who live in Syria's neighboring countries. Unable to repatriate while facing unprecedented social and economic challenges in their countries of refuge, resettlement through safer routes and less competitive pathways to better destinations has become a viable option for many. Japan, due to its geographical distance and cultural differences, was an unusual destination for Syrians. Over the course of thirteen years, migration to Japan shifted from a historically lesser-known path, with 188 Syrians residing in the country, to a more popular sanctuary, hosting nearly 1,500 in 2024. This study aims to investigate the socio-economic factors that have led Japan to become a transit stop for many Syrians who had different plans before coming. Most of the existing research focuses on immobility in developing countries of refuge, people's inability to leave their country of origin, asylum seekers stranded in 'transit' countries, in addition to examining repatriation barriers. This study investigates a unique case where migrants are living in a developed country presumed to be their final destination, only to realize it has become another phase in their journey. Due to Japan's highly-esteemed reputation in the Arab world and the perceived image of life in Japan, Syrians had highly expectations assuming challenges would be considerably minor. Many decided to leave because of these unmet expectations, despite the presumed exceptional quality of life and the convenience of the country.

Keywords: *Migration, immobility, Syria, Japan, unusal destinations.*

Introduction

The Urge to Immigrate

Approximately 14 million Syrians are currently displaced, either internally or externally (SNHR 2024a), with over 5 millions residing in neighboring countries — Turkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq (UNHCR 2024). Syrian refugees in regional host countries face severe political and socio-economic challenges, compounded by uncertainty of their future. In Lebanon, only 17% have legal residency permits, with limited access to basic services like education and healthcare (VASyR 2023, p. 36), and remain at risk of being forcibly deported to Syria (ACHR 2024, p.4). While in Turkiye, Syrians are under temporary protection, they endure legal challenges concerning their status and, more critically, suffer from violence, political incitement campaigns, and refoulement (SNHR 2024b; ACHR 2024, pp.25-27).

Although host countries are increasing their efforts to force Syrians to repatriate, there remains no prospect of a safe, dignified, and voluntary return for them in the foreseeable future (Marks 2023). Aiming for a better future and affected by the deteriorating living conditions, many Syrian (forced) migrants had to leave the region towards other, both usual

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[1] PhD candidate at Waseda University, Japan., masri@fuji.waseda.jp, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1100-259X.

and unusual, destinations. Due to several instrumental barriers, Syrians are usually unable to easily immigrate. The Syrian passport is the second lowest-ranked travel document in terms of global mobility (Henley & Partners 2024). Schengen visa applications for Syrians have one of the highest rejection rates (Januzi 2022). Contrary to expectations, it is one of the most expensive passports in the world (CSIS 2016). These challenges have made it extremely difficult for Syrians to pursue resettlement through legal routes.

Millions of Syrian refugees, constrained by the geographical limitations, were forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries. For those with the privilege of choice, determining the intended destination was shaped by religion, culture, language, existing social networks, and financial constraints. The instrumental immobility of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries, along with the challenges they endure and the uncertainty of their future, compel many to flee through life-threatening irregular routes hoping to reach Europe.

Japan as an Unusual Destination

"Unusual destinations" of refuge refer to less conventional or 'non-iconic' places where refugees have sought safety (Lemaire and Oesch 2024, p.1). Japan has been an unusual destination for Syrians for geographic isolation, cultural differences, and the relatively small size of the Syrian diaspora (Liu-Farrer et al. 2024, p.1). Migration to unusual destinations, including Japan, has become a phenomenon for hundreds of Syrians who have faced significant barriers in Syria's neighboring countries including unprecedented social and economic challenges. As a result, resettlement through safer routes and less competitive pathways to better destinations such as Japan has become a viable option for many. Within fourteen years, according to the Japanese Ministry of Justice, migration to Japan shifted from a historically lesser known path for Syrians to a relatively more popular sanctuary.

According to the same source, most Syrians who are currently residing in Japan arrived after 2011, following the outbreak of the uprising in Syria (2024). Many of them were forcibly displaced from their homes and either unable or unwilling to repatriate. Few Syrians in Japan hold official refugee status; most have student or work visas. The majority, including my interviewees have a "well-founded fear of being persecuted" if they return to Syria, alligning with the 1951 Refugee Convention's definition of a refugee (UNHCR 1951, p.3). However, since Syrians in Japan are not generally recognized as refugees, I will use the term "migrants" to to refer to all Syrians, regardless of the circumsntances of their displacement, their reasons for leaving the country, or their ability to return, to ensure inclusivity.

Japan is a unique country with a rich culture and has one of the best quality public and private services and highest life expectancy rates in the world. Yet, Syrians who recently migrated to Japan face multilayered cultural and socio-economic challenges that have made it less attractive for many after their arrival. However, the total number of Syrians in Japan increased approximately sevenfold, from 188 in 2010 to 1,497 in June 2024 (MoJ 2024). This notable increase indicates that the Syrian community in Japan might serve as a foundation for a larger Syrian diaspora in the future.

Unlike Western countries with more diverse and multicultural populations, Japan remains relatively homogeneous. English is rarely spoken in the country, and less than two percent are believed to speak the language fluently (Ploscaru 2024). The country lacks a robust system to support and integrate refugees (and migrants) that many developed countries have. Until the eighties, Japan has long been reluctant to immigration due to the ethno-nationalist identity of

the country and the cautious public stance towards migrants (Liu-Farrer 2020, pp.4-6). Some argue that Japan is hesitant to accept more migrants and refugees due to historical and racial factors, which have shaped its policies of exclusion, often justified by security concerns (Hatcher and Murakami 2020, pp.60-77).

This research is a novel investigation of the emotional and psychological aspects of Syrians' experiences in Japan. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of why refugees in a developed country may still be dissatisfied, turning the country from a presumably permanent destination to a transit stop despite the country's perceived prosperity and high quality of life. Approaching the experiences of Syrians in Japan through an emotional lens will help deepen understanding of how negative emotions, such as frustration and disappointment, impact the sense of belonging and mobility decisions of Syrians. This study argues that even when material conditions are seemingly favorable, emotional and psychological factors can force migrants to leave.

Within this article, I investigate the factors behind Japan's becoming a transit stop for many Syrians who initially had considered it a final destination. I address how their dissatisfaction was shaped, what contributed to their idealized image of Japan in the first place, and how these emotions can shape further migration decisions. This research allows us to see the complex emotional and psychological impact on Syrians' integration, belonging, and future decision-making. The instrumental immobility of Syrians in the context of a developed country is also briefly addressed.

Existing Literature
Immobility and Transit Migration Studies

In migration studies, researchers tend to focus more on mobility and migration drivers, neglecting the structural and individual factors contributing to the inability or unwillingness of people to move (Schewel 2020, p.329). While theorists usually see immobility as the default or "obvious" condition for people, mobility is seen as the exception that needs explanation, which has led to less academic knowledge assessing a state of immobility (Chatterji 2017, pp.511-515). Just as immobility is often understudied in migration studies, there is also a significant lack of focus on developed countries in immobility scholarship.

In some cases, people might be halted their countries of origins or unwilling to leave (Black and Collyer 2014; Kallström et al. 2022), might be unable to leave their poor or fragile countries of asylum (Achilli 2016; Adams and Ghanem 2023; Chatterji 2017), unable to repatriate due to a lack of resources (Black and Collyer 2014; Collyer and De Haas 2012). There is limited research on the context of developed countries where migrants can be "stuck" due to kinship obligations (Belloni 2018, pp.1-2), presumably based on the assumption that these countries are seen as a destination only.

"Transit migration" largely implies risk, illegality, and temporality of a group of people passing through to their intended destination, most likely the EU (Collyer et al. 2012, pp.469-471). Whether due to security concerns or instrumental constraints, being involuntarily immobile in transit countries causes significant distress and dissatisfaction for migrants. In some cases, a country – initially viewed as a transit stop on the journey to a developed country with a perceived higher quality of life – might become their final destination. Rather than waiting in limbo, migrants might find themselves forced to give up their aspirations, revise their original plans, and settle in the transit country.

"Cruel Optimism in Migration"

"Cruel optimism" refers to a condition, or a relation, in which one's desires or expectations become an obstacle to achieving happiness. While optimism is inherently positive, according to Berland who coined the term in 2011, it becomes cruel when one becomes so attached to these aspirations in a way that they hinder the very goals they were intended to achieve (Berlant 2011, pp.1-4). When addressing "objects of desires" and aspirations, Berlant suggests, we include a "cluster of promises" of how one expects to receive or experience something. Our attachment to the "object of desire" reflects our understanding and how we maintain hope in the idea we're attached to (Berlant 2011, pp.15-24).

By linking "cruel optimism" to migration, Coates introduced the concept of "cruel optimism of mobility" to describe the dynamics between migration and the promises associated with it (Coates 2019, pp.472-476). The concept connects Chinese migrants' aspirations to their transitional status, highlighting the tensions between their desires and imaginations of a "good life" and the uncertainties of their realities after migrating to Japan. Unrealistic "cruel" expectations are not exclusive to people who are willing to migrate or solely shaped by the desired image of the destination. These expectations are often shaped by Japan's "soft power," including its global influence through its media and culture.

One of the main resources of Japan's international politics is "soft power" (Nye 1992, pp.99-100). In the beginning of this century, Japan integrated pop culture and "cool Japan" into its international diplomacy, increasing the popularity of Japanese media in global markets (Iwabuchi 2015, pp.419-421). Japan has been exporting its newly-embraced "cool" image to the world through Anime, Manga, video games, T.V. dramas, and other forms of local popular culture after a century of promoting traditional arts (Choo 2013, p.85). Between its century-long promotion of cultural arts and the rise of the new "cool" image for over two decades, Japan has built a strong global reputation in the Arab world.

Emotional Dimensions and the Idealized Image

Analyzing the dynamics of migration through a materialistic instrumental perspective can't fully answer the question of why people migrate or why they decide to stay or leave their new place. The desire to migrate, like other social phenomena, is not a simple process driven by one reason in isolation from other factors, but rather arises from a combination of various interconnected reasons (Weber 1978) cited in (Liu-Farrer 2022, p.115).

It's true that economic instrumental factors play an important role in human mobility and migration dynamics (Kikkawa et al. 2019, pp.6-13), and people usually tend to move to a country where they expect to make more income and pay less during the journey, according to some asylum seekers (Brekke and Aarset 2019, p.34). However, the role of emotional dynamics in migrants' social integration and a sense of belonging in the host society is also significant (Mahmud 2021, pp.13-20). In the case of Syrians, the emotional impact resulting of cruel optimism and disappointment of unmet high expectations shape their migration and relocation dynamics. Whether positive or negative, emotions are stronger than instrumental concerns in the new destination and they highly affect individuals' decision to stay or leave (Liu-Farrer 2022, p.113). To migrate or to leave the new destination, Liu-Farrer argues, is primarily a decision about the places, and it is usually negative emotions, whether concerning the place or the conditions experienced in that place, that force a migrant to move (Liu-Farrer 2022, p.114).

Investigating Syrian migrants in Japan through the lens of emotions and cruel optimism in migration highlights a distinctive complicated dynamic that goes beyond regular experiences of migration. Syrians suffer from violence, racism, and lack of access to basic services in different parts of the world, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the absence of these factors in a developed country leads to satisfaction. Arrival to a new destination is only the beginning of a new emotionally multilayered journey. Syrians in Japan face overwhelming emotional challenges including trauma shaped by prolonged challenging circumstances and social isolation in their new place. For the majority interviewed, homesickness is less relevant than Coates' sample of Chinese students, as they cannot return to a country that is still unsafe according to the several international entities (Frelick 2024; UNGA 2024). The complexity of their situation differs from existing literature on migrants in developing transit countries like Indonesia and Turkiye. Migrants who had a choice, were able to prioritize and decide on the most suitable and accessible destination. In the case of Japan, Syrians must cope not only with the geographical distance, but also with the challenge of adapting to a new culture, a different racial context, a new language, and on top of that, a highly restrictive immigration policy.

The unusualness of Japan as a destination for Syrians indicates that the existing diasporic social networks are weak, compared to Chinese and Vietnamese networks, for instance. These Syrians – mostly arrived in Japan on student visas using education as a pathway to escape hardship in the region– seek more than higher education. Unlike other international students in Japan, they are seeking belonging and expecting long-term settlement. Their migration journey is more complicated due to an idealized image of Japan, where their high expectations clash with the reality in a country that's socially insular, and politically unwilling to formally take refugees in. All these factors intensified the emotional impact and made the fall from their "cruel optimism" more difficult.

Methodology

Based on my fieldwork among fellow Syrians in different areas of Japan between 2022 and 2024, I interviewed fifty-seven participants from diverse ethnic and sectarian backgrounds who had arrived in Japan before and after the spark of the popular uprising in Syria in 2011. Most arrived in Japan through scholarshipslike MEXT and JICA's JISR to pursue higher degrees or study Japanese, alongside self-funded visitors, dependents, and those joining family. The qualitative interviews conducted aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of interviewees. The semi-structured questions covered different topics including their pre-arrival expectations, information they had about the country, the challenges they are facing, and their long-term plans.

To enlist interviewees, I used social media platforms and messaging applications to reach out to students and graduates of the program I was admitted to. Then, I reached out to other Syrians in other areas through snowball sampling. Interviews were, in-person or online, audio-recorded, conducted in either Arabic or English. Anonymity was guaranteed for all, which is why no identifiable details are mentioned and all participants quoted in the article have adopted pseudonyms.

Thirty-one interviewees out of fifty-seven expressed a desire to relocate to another country, including four naturalized Syrians and one permanent resident. To reduce variables and make it more possible to accurately examine emotions and decision-making, the data examined includes the eighteen interviewees, including eight women, who initially considered Japan as

their final destination but later viewed it a transit stop in their ongoing journey of migration. Thematic analysis was employed to identify the patterns within the data. Additionally, cross case analysis was conducted to compare interviewees' lived experiences, highlighting similarities and differences. At the time of the interviews, the participants were, on average, in their thirties. Three had relocated to North America and the Middle East, while four moved shortly after conducting the interviews.

Discussion

Japan's "Soft Power" in the Arab World

Since the seventies, Japan took measures to promote its culture as part of the country's "cultural diplomacy" and, consequently, exported anime characters, manga comics, movies, and pop music to the world as part of its "soft power" initiatives (Dirir 2022, pp.272-273). Besides diplomatic efforts and economic ties, the central driver of Japan's soft power in the Arab region has been mass culture, particularly pop culture and the "cool Japan". Arabs view Japan's development with deep respect and have always admired the fact that the Japanese have successfully advanced while preserving their heritage and cultural identity (Barhoum 1984, p.35). Consumers associate "Made in Japan" with reliable and high-quality electronics (Zbib et al. 2021, pp.194-195). Several interviewees stated that they admire Japanese culture and were impressed by a particular anime series, while others associated the quality of life in the country with the renowned reliability of Japanese cars, seeing the excellence of manufacturing as an evidence of the country's life standards. "My perception of Japan was centered around Toyota cars, heavy machinery, precise manufacturing, factories, and some expectations from things I saw on T.V." Said Mahmoud, an engineer in his twenties who arrived late 2018 to pursue a master's degree. Except for "safety", interviewees rarely mentioned other aspects of life when discussing their high expectations before coming, which shows the impact of mass culture in shaping their cruel optimism.

"Planet Japan"

"Planet Japan" was a term coined by a Saudi Arabian journalist and presenter. Ahmad Al-Shugairi's T.V. show *Khawater* (Reflections in Arabic) was very popular in the Arab world which was broadcasted for over a decade where he offered an interesting mixture of Islamic values and entertainment (IMS 2011). *Khawater* introduced Japanese culture to its viewers to inspire viewers in Saudi Arabia and Arab states, and contributed to motivating Saudi children to learn the Japanese language (Al-Nofaie 2018, p.452). The show has also gained huge popularity in Syria and was consistently mentioned during the interviews as a main source of information about Japan before participants' arrival. Sameer, who had arrived through the JISR program, smiled as he shared "Since I was a child, I have always dreamed about coming to Japan. I was passionate about its animation and lifestyle. *Khawater* gave me an amazing impression of the country's technology and culture". As the term "Planet Japan" implies, the show highlighted the uniqueness and exceptionalism of Japan, focusing on kindness, honesty, organization and commitment of its people, and the country's cleanliness, public order, and safety. Syrians who arrived in Japan were indeed familiar with the positive aspects, but they had limited knowledge about the challenges of residing and working in the country.

Cruel Optimism and the Idealized Image

People tend to rely heavily on word-of-mouth, especially from family and friends, to shape their perception and make decisions about where to travel (Murphy et al. 2007, pp.517-518). Being an unusual destination for them, Syrians lacked access to honest and reliable information about Japan, including both pros and cons of living in the country. With no acquaintances who had experienced Japan prior to their arrival, they could not obtain genuine insights, relying only on what was promoted on the internet and shared by the representatives of the Japanese programs they had applied to.

In each of the eighteen interviews, I would ask "What were your expectations before coming?" The answers slightly varied, ranging from one exceptional aspect of living in "Planet Japan" to another. They confirmed that Japan is indeed safe, clean, and organized, and were pleased to discover that Japanese people are kind and respectful, with no aggressive or racist behavior in public, unlike Europe and the U.S., along with several other advantages. However, many of the assumptions about the less-publicized aspects of life in Japan, as well as things they took for granted, were unrealistic.

For instance, assumptions that Japan mirrors Europe in terms of diversity and inclusion, English proficiency, openness to migration, and fair working conditions resulted in significant dissatisfaction after arrival. Although she said "I had no expectations before coming, but when I used to talk to my relatives in Europe, they used to tell me how their city offices were offering them free language and integration courses. Unlike here, they join countless events and activities," Asmaa, who came from Lebanon to join her husband, did have expectations. She assumed that the programs offered for migrants and asylum seekers in European countries would be available in Japan; language training, social events, financial support, and long-term residency or a refugee status for her and her two children.

Extended family and friends are central to Arab communities, where regular visits foster discussions of daily issues, finding solutions, and mutual support. Arabs put trust in their families and friends and ask for their support when they face challenges (Kenny et al. 2005, pp.25-28). Marwa, a mid-career unemployed professional, expressed frustration over not having close Japanese friends saying, "I always feel like a stranger and that I will never belong. [After living for over five years in Japan] I don't have any friends here, except for one kind lady in her sixties who often visits us." For Marwa, being "at home in the world," as coates describes belonging, is primarily about having close friends. For her, a true friend is someone who regularly exchanges visits and spends some time with her toddler while her husband is working extended hours; someone who genuinely cares and offers support when needed. However, the definition of friendship in Japan may differ, and this brings us back to cruel optimism, managing expectations, and lack of information about the destination. Marwa and many other Syrian females in Japan, suffer from loneliness and social isolation despite their desperate attempts to be socially connected with the Japanese. When their attempts to integrate into the community fail or or presumed to be rebuffed, they seemingly turn to those that are culturally similar and investing time with other Syrians and Arabs in the country. However, since Syrians remain a small community scattered across Japan, Syrians abandon social connectedness and become "comfortable only at home," as Marwa expressed. Other interviewees also drew a clear line between not having friends and their emotional distress and willingness to leave for a more diverse Arabic or English-speaking country.

Regarding the cruel optimism of their migration, interviewees assumed that experiences of friends and acquaintances in Europe and North America would be mirrored in their experiences after migrating to Japan, only to come to terms with emotions and the realization that this would not in fact occur. They had anticipated similar opportunities of financial support and integration. Upon realizing that this wasn't applicable to Japan, due to strict immigration policies, cultural barriers, and limited social and governmental support, their emotional distress intensified. This unexpected mismatch between their idealized image of Japan and reality deepened their emotional distress, reinforcing the idea or finding other alternatives and eventually relocating elsewhere.

Reality and Unmet Expectations

Interviewees took it for granted that Japanese people must speak English, associating the English language proficiency with the development and international standing of the country. This unexpected challenge contributed to the dissatisfaction of students, and their dependents, who arrived through programs where English was the means of instruction, including MEXT and JISR scholarship programs. Unable to communicate with locals in English and finding it difficult to afford enrolling in long-term language programs to learn Japanese, many felt socially withdrawn and eventually abandoned their desperate attempts to integrate into what they perceived to be a the reserved and relatively insular Japanese society.

Financial struggle was a main reason behind the disappointment that interviewees expressed and led some to describe emotional distress. Naser, who arrived with his wife and two kids in 2017 from Jordan, expressed how unstable and financially challenged he was, wondering "how could I know if a 150,000 JPY monthly allowance would be sufficient for my family's expenses? In Jordan, when I converted it to Jordanian dinars, it was more than enough. I never anticipated that living in Japan would be this expensive." He stated that he was not allowed to take a part-time job while pursuing his master's, while his wife, who wears a *hijab* (headscarf), found it very difficult to secure employment due to language barriers and discriminatory reasons. Despite the growing number of foreigners from diverse backgrounds, including Syrians, migrants in Japan face challenges with Japanese companies' which expect them to fully conform, expecting them to behave [and appear] Japanese (Hof and Tseng 2020, p.511).

While education and job status strongly affect foreign workers' life satisfaction, their psychological well-being seems to be shaped by socio-cultural factors (Ikeguchi 2007, p.107). The eighteen interviewees were not all under-paid, facing financial difficulties, or struggling with challenges at work. What also seems to be significantly important were the emotional experiences of what was described as unmet expectations and the emotional stability stemming from a meaningful social connectedness, where they either felt included or alienated.

In my observations, I found that Syrian migrants with limited formal education, those without a bachelor's degree, and the ones without work experience had less "cruel optimism" before arrival, which led to less disappointment. On the contrary, highly educated mid-career professionals tended to have much higher expectations of the opportunities and social status they might attain, leading to more dissatisfaction and instability. For instance, Dani, who held a senior position at an international organization in Jordan, expressed his disappointment after failing to find a suitable job despite applying to hundreds of Japanese firms. "They [employers]

only evaluate me based on my level of Japanese. I was advised to find a low-income job that required no academic background or prior experience. This would literally destroy my career, to which I dedicated over a decade of my life to build". Forced into low-income jobs such as retail and convenience stores, elderly care, cleaning and food services, many Syrians, especially those with master's degrees, expressed emotional instability and were more eager to leave due to their assumptions of an uncertain future.

Instrumental Immobility in Japan

A natural question that arises after learning about these challenges is: Why don't they simply relocate? Despite finishing her master's and receiving her certificate from a prestigious Japanese university, Iman spent weeks applying for scholarships at international universities around the world, hoping to find a way to relocate with her husband and son. After failing to get any letters of acceptance, she tried to apply for a visa to North America and a country in the Arabian Gulf states, but both applications were rejected. "It's almost impossible for Syrians to get a visa to any country, and we can't return to Syria under these circumstances… We're stuck now," she said.

Rima, a single mother in her thirties, expressed her willingness to relocate regardless of the language spoken in the destination country. Despite being a professor with a stable job, a promising career, no workplace discrimination, and having two children fluent in Japanese and thriving in their Japanese school, she expressed a strong desire to relocate. She successfully navigated all the challenges facing her family, academic, and professional levels and described a point of comfort after years of hardships. However, emotional distress from isolation, societal exclusion, and lack of friends drove her to consider Japan as a transit stop and to continue relocating when possible. "I live and work among Japanese people, but still feel isolated. It is unbelievably difficult for someone like me coming from the Middle East, where emotional connections with the community is a priority," said Rima. The emotional distress and the lack of social connectedness made what might seem to be a "good life" in a developed country less attractive for her.

Restrictions on issuing visas to Syrians is one of the main challenges behind Syrians' involuntary immobility. Despite the restrictions on issuing Schengen visas, for example, people keep moving (Aygül and Mertek 2024, pp.1-23). Even for Syrian businesspeople who are displaced in the region, obtaining a visa is not an easy task (World Bank 2020, p.83). After receiving refugee status in Europe, since most European states are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Syrians are eligible to apply for travel documents, leaving them with more freedom of movement within and outside the EU. Unlike Japan, where few Syrians are recognized as refugees and movement in the region is more restricted.

During my fieldwork and building on the instances I experienced, the "designated activities" visa which is usually granted for Syrians in Japan after graduation from an educational institution undermines the possibility of getting other visas. Syrians are not recognized as refugees in Japan but were rather resettled to the country through "informal asylum" programs (Almasri 2020, p.29). Many Syrian migrants in Japan are settled and are not planning to leave the country. However, despite sounding somewhat negative, my focus is on those who see Japan as a transit stop and plan to leave after initially considering it a final destination. The eighteen interviewees faced instrumental barriers that have hindered their ability to relocate easily. They suffered from bureaucratic procedures that might take them a year to

issue or renew their passports, financial difficulties to afford at least $400 for each passport to be issued, and from the lack of information about other destinations.

Several interviewees intend to depart without any prior knowledge about the potential destination and have, once again, high expectations of the new country. Three interviewees mentioned that they were applying for Ph.D. programs that they weren't interested in so they could leave. Some even stated that they were waiting to be naturalized, get the Japanese passports, then intended to move, seeing naturalization as an instrumental means of relocating somewhere else. While security concerns, lack of services, and materialistic hardships pushed them to leave for Japan with high expectations and unrealistic image in mind, their emotional distress is now pushing them to leave for another destination with no adequate knowledge and, again, with "cruel optimism," leaving them to the risk of emotional distress of unmet expectations.

Conclusion

This research also challenges the prevailing assumption about developed countries and the "cruel optimism in migration". It highlights that Syrians' unrealistically high expectations of Japan led to feelings of instability and a lack of belonging to a place that did not match the image they had initially envisioned. It also explores the tension between migrants' high hopes of a developed country, such as Japan, and the challenging circumstances that led them to treat their assumed destination as a transit stop, challenging the assumption that developed countries with high life standards are always the final destination. The existing scholarship has put little emphasis on the emotional perspective. Refugees' emotions are often overlooked in migration decision-making analysis (Hagen-Zanker et al. 2023, p.352). While Syrians tend to be categorized into one group of victims who are seeking safety in better developed destinations where they can have a good quality of life, I conclude that this generalization oversimplifies their emotional experiences by focusing on their fear as the sole factor for fleeing the country of origin and the regional countries of refuge. Their journey of migration and all complex dynamics embedded in it are mistakenly perceived as a mission accomplished. Migrants, including the ones with a refugee background, must not be viewed as fortunate survivors who successfully reached their intended destination, and attention must be drawn to their emotional well-being and sense of belonging after arrival. Assuming that all Syrians are distressed and dissatisfied in both their country of origin and the regional countries of refuge, while expecting them to be happily settled in their new destination with no reason to move is also an oversimplification of human emotions.

In the context of neighboring countries of refuge, Syrians can create or maintain their own social networks due to the substantial number of refugees in the region. Despite the significant challenges they endure, they have at least one linguistic, cultural, racial, or religious similarity with the host communities. Europe and North America do not offer these commonalities, yet they offer stronger support, well-established diasporic networks, and more robust immigration systems, and on top of that, diversity, which may help bridge the gap caused by the geographical distance and language barriers. In most usual destinations, there is at least something in common. On the other hand, Syrian migrants in Japan lack these commonalities and benefits under the current immigration policies and their inability to adequately address their needs, despite the uniqueness of this destination.

Interviewees had unrealistically "cruel" high expectations of Japan before coming. Syrians' image of Japan was almost exclusively shaped by the tangible products and more intangible

factors such as assumptions and expectations around unknown place. An idealized image was shaped, not only by Japan's soft power, but also by Arab media outlets and interviewees' own perceptions and inaccurate associations of precise manufacturing and public order with social connectedness and happiness. These unmet expectations of "Planet Japan" regarding the unpublicized aspects of life urged them to reconsider their view of Japan as a final destination. The complexity of emotions after leaving they communities they belong to intertwined with social isolation and the absence of robust integration programs played the most important role in viewing their residence in Japan as a phase in an ongoing journey of migration. The impact of emotions shifted the question from "Why migrate from a safe, clean, developed country with kind people and rich culture where most material needs are fulfilled?" to "Why not?" This shift, however, carries a high risk of future disapointment, as it is, once again, driven by idealized expectations of new destinations.

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