Syrians Migrants Flock to German Rust-Belt City of Wuppertal

In city looking for new vitality, migrants find abundant housing, ample help from immigrants who came before, and plenty of difficulties

Omran Abdulrahman, in background, often runs into recent Syrian refugees when he leaves his home in Wuppertal, Germany, where he has lived for eight years. PHOTO: ALEXA VACHON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By RUTH BENDER and MOHAMMAD NOUR ALAKRAA
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WUPPERTAL, Germany—Walking the streets of this city on the Rhineland’s edge, Omran Abdulrahman often hears a familiar sound from his youth: Syrian Arabic.

The 48-year-old immigrated to Germany from Syria two decades ago. Now he is part of a group of established Arab immigrants helping a new community of Syrians emerge in this western German city.

“When I came here, I was alone,” said Mr. Abdulrahman. “Now word has spread that we help.”

He clutched under his arm a black book filled with contacts for translators, apartment owners and doctors willing to assist new arrivals for free.

In Wuppertal, a faded rust-belt city looking for new vitality, migrants are finding abundant housing and ample help from immigrants who came before. But they are also running up against locals they say are out to exploit them and Islamists seeking new followers.
Wuppertal shows how the stream of nearly one million refugees and migrants that have arrived in Germany this year is changing the face of the European Union’s most populous nation. City officials say Wuppertal’s Syrian community has roughly quadrupled to as many as 4,000 people over the past year, partly because Syrians who have obtained asylum elsewhere in Germany are being drawn to the growing community here.

Some established immigrants worry that the new arrivals will give all foreigners a bad name. “If they work, OK, they can stay. But if not, they need to go,” said Awat Kader, a 53-year-old taxi driver from Iraq who has lived in Wuppertal for 16 years. “I have always worked.”

Mr. Kader said he helps migrants with translations, partly with an eye to facilitating their integration and preventing trouble. Besides providing material help, many who settled here decades ago also try to educate their arriving compatriots about German culture and customs, including how to behave in interviews with asylum workers.

“They are an enrichment to Wuppertal, but we also know integration will be hard for many,” said Dagher Haidar, a Syrian-German dentist who grew up in both Wuppertal and Syria.

Mr. Abdulrahman brought Mr. Haidar his first Syrian refugee patient two years ago, a little boy with a swollen cheek he spotted wandering aimlessly around the city with his crying mother one afternoon.

Mr. Haidar says he now works an average of four hours more a week to treat refugees, often at no charge.

Ahmed Henik, who came to Germany from northern Syria in 1995 and now owns a Wuppertal taxi company, said he has bought 12 apartments across the city in recent years that he now rents out mostly to Syrians, often below market price.

Officials in the local government, run by a left-of-center mayor, say they are content with the high numbers of new arrivals, who they hope could give a much-needed economic boost to a city that has lost some of its past industrial base. After losing a sixth of its population in the past 30 years, Wuppertal’s population is now growing again, said Jürgen Lemmer, who is in charge of integration and immigration for the city.

Some state officials have voiced concerns about the potential radicalization of migrants by local Islamists. Local police say Islamists have tried to approach newly arrived migrants, but a police spokeswoman said there was no evidence that recruiting efforts have borne fruit.

Some mosques, concerned that the migrants could fall under the sway of radical preachers, offer social and sports activities to keep them off the streets.
“There is a big fear that the general opinion will tilt against foreigners,” said Mohamed Abodahab, spokesman for the city’s large Alsalam mosque. He said the mosque is planning to expand, having run out of room for all the newcomers at Friday prayers.

In nearby Oberbarmen—a neighborhood that has long been home to people with immigrant backgrounds—Syrians now fill entire apartment houses. An Arab grocery store recently stocked up on products and extended opening hours.

“When I first went to the local flea market, I barely heard any Arabic. Now, you barely hear German,” said Yesra Osman, who came to Wuppertal from northeastern Syria in 2009 and now lives above the grocery shop with her husband and two children. She and her husband have lodged dozens of Syrian refugees and helped them get necessary registration papers, she said.

Christel Simon, mayor of Oberbarmen and a member of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s conservative Christian Democratic Union, said groups of many different immigrant backgrounds and ethnic Germans live peacefully together in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. “People help each other out,” she said.

But some refugees say the help they get isn’t always free. Dema Al-Bakour, 30, came to Wuppertal from eastern Germany after a German-Syrian man in an online chat group offered his aid. Once she arrived, she found he wanted money for helping her settle in. “It’s difficult to know who to trust sometimes,” she said.

“Some want money, too much money,” said Saddam Hariri, 28, whose family shares a house with around 40 other Syrians.

At the Abu Bakr mosque, volunteers set up a dedicated office to better organize help for new arrivals after a man posing as a member of the mosque asked migrants to pay for some services, according to Rashid Ihizane, who is in charge of refugee aid at the mosque.

“It gives a bad image and we are trying to change that,” Mr. Ihizane said.

Despite the short-term challenges of finding housing and eventually jobs for migrants, city officials say Wuppertal will benefit from refugees in the long run. Mr. Lemmer is optimistic that migrants will find jobs in the long run because their arrival will
stimulate the local economy, despite Wuppertal’s higher-than-average 9.3% unemployment rate.

Mr. Abdulrahman, now employed by the city as a migrant aid worker, wants more Syrians to come to Wuppertal, despite Germany recently tightening asylum rules for Syrians in a bid to curb the influx.

“They will come,” he said.

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