



2

Umayyad: A Syrian Refugee Business in Bremen, Germany

Aki Harima, Manal Haimour, and Jörg Freiling

2.1 Country-Specific Information and Data

The world is currently facing the biggest displacement of people on record with around 65.6 million displaced across the world. Around 22.5 million of those are refugees (UNHCR 2017a). Germany occupies the eighth place among countries receiving the most refugees, with 669,482 refugees by the end of 2016 (UNHCR 2017b). By September 2017, 168,306 asylum applications had been registered in Germany—with 92.6% of the applications from Syrian nationals. Bremen had received 1,879 refugees (BAMF 2017a).

An estimation of the costs of the refugee crisis specifies an amount of 21.7 and 21.3 billion EUR in Germany in 2016 and 2017, respectively (BAMF 2017b). The cost registered for Bremen in 2016 was 0.43 billion EUR (Die Welt 2017). Despite these high costs, Germany still welcomes

A. Harima (✉) • M. Haimour • J. Freiling
University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany
e-mail: harima@uni-bremen.de; haimour@uni-bremen.de;
freiling@uni-bremen.de

refugees, following the motto “In Germany, helping refugees is a humanitarian matter of course” (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. 2015). Unexpectedly receiving a large number of people from different countries, host countries need to develop solutions urgently to facilitate economic and societal integration of newcomers. Entrepreneurship is a mode of economic integration through which refugees can create jobs and values on their own terms (Light et al. 1993). However, refugee entrepreneurship has been investigated by surprisingly few scholars in the past (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008). Little is known about characteristics of their entrepreneurial activities and what would be considered as enablers or constraints for refugee entrepreneurship.

Muhannad is a refugee entrepreneur who wanted to become independent of the governmental refugee financial aid in Germany by becoming an entrepreneur. Muhannad started a business called “Umayyad Restaurant” in the gastronomy sector. He shared his story with us, which helped us to shed a light on his reasons for leaving his home country and to understand what he endured to get to the host country. Moreover, the interview revealed concrete business information, as well as his individual, community and institutional enablers and constraints.

2.2 Personal History of Reasons for Leaving his Home Country

Muhannad is originally from Syria, and acquired his academic law degree there. After working as an attorney for a number of years, he decided to start working in Saudi Arabia as a sales manager at a domestic company. His children grew up mainly in Saudi Arabia. Being a manager in an established company and a pillar of his family, Muhannad had established a successful and stable life, both in his career and in his private life.

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, however, was a defining moment in his life. The situation in Syria was getting worse day by day. Muhannad faced a dilemma when witnessing the devastating situation in his home country. He was thinking of changing his residence to Syria and decided to go back home to assess the situation. Things in Damascus

were much worse than he had expected. The war had already destroyed the country's economy and institutions so devastatingly so that it was not possible for someone living abroad to find a job. His nephew became one of the victims who died during a bomb explosion on the street while he was grocery shopping. The security conditions became disastrous. Safe places could no longer be found in the country—not even in houses, hospitals or schools.

Muhannad was confronted with tough choices. One option would be going back to his homeland at great risk to himself and his family. A second alternative would be staying in Saudi Arabia. A third option would be fleeing the region and becoming an asylum seeker. The first option was out of the question, as Muhannad made the security of his family top priority. Muhannad also did not pursue the second option because of his son's education. His son was about to finish high school and wanted to pursue an undergraduate degree. However, foreign residents in Saudi Arabia do not have a legal right to study at universities in the country, despite being born there. At that moment, other countries in the region started tightening their visa regulations for Syrian migrants due to their reluctance to get involved in the politically and socially complicated situation. As a father, Muhannad had seen the development of his eldest son, who had become an honors student because of his excellent record in school. It was not an option for him to give up on creating a way for his son to study at a university. Therefore, he decided to give up his career and successful life in Saudi Arabia to go to Europe as an asylum seeker.

2.3 Personal Reasons for and Circumstances around Getting to the Host Country

After deciding to flee, Muhannad selected Sweden as his destination, since he believed that Sweden would offer the most favorable conditions for his son's education and the best social system for his family.

A number of asylum seekers have difficult experiences when fleeing. Muhannad's journey to Europe was also far from easy. Muhannad first went to Turkey and then attempted to get to Greece. First, he tried to go

to Greece via a land route, which turned out to be too dangerous. Thus, he decided to go to Greece by sea. After his arrival on an insecure rubber boat driven by an inexperienced broker, he reached a refugee camp. Yet, his situation in Greece became even worse. While crossing the border between Turkey and Greece, his hand was injured. He neither had his own medicine, nor received any medical supports in the camp. Muhannad begged camp staffs to take him to a doctor, showing them his hand bleeding. He ended up receiving a few painkillers, which only served as a temporary solution.

Shortly after his arrival in Greece, an unexpected thing occurred. One night, the staffs of the camp suddenly took Muhannad and some other asylum seekers to an island in the Turkish territory without any explanation. It was an illegal action of the camp staffs. Muhannad recalls the situation: “They did not see us as human beings. They threw us on the island. We couldn’t escape. It was so cold and freezing.” Muhannad and other people who were left on the island did everything they could to get off the island. They called the Turkish police, who could not identify their location. They made a fire, hoping that someone would notice them. After trying various solutions for a few days, the Turkish police finally identified their location and rescued them.

The Turkish police took them to Turkey, where Muhannad had to stay for one month. But he did not give up on fleeing to Europe for the sake of his family’s future; meanwhile they were still waiting for him in Saudi Arabia. Next, he took a dangerous route in a rubber boat driven by a broker without any sailing experience. It took them four hours to cross the border and reach a Greek island. Muhannad stayed in a camp there until he received a document that allowed him to stay in Greece as an asylum seeker.

The journeys to the subsequent countries were neither easy nor safe. Muhannad walked all the way from Greece to Macedonia, and from Macedonia to Serbia. On the way, Muhannad and other group members were caught several times by the police and sent back to Greece. Some people offered them help in exchange for money, which turned out to be a trick. Muhannad slept on the street. After a month of travel in difficult conditions, Muhannad and four other people reached Hungary, where he found a person to take them to Germany by car. During his flight, he had

many chances to talk to other asylum seekers and gather more information about the destination country. In Sweden, his original destination, the process to receive legal status as a refugee takes a long time. He heard that in Germany it was much faster, which was a decisive motivator to go there. Indeed, Muhannad received his official residency just a month after arrival in Germany.

2.4 Business Data and History of Establishing his Business

A year and a half after arriving in Germany, Muhannad opened a restaurant called “Umayyad” in the center of Bremen, in February 2017. Muhannad chose a Hanseatic city—the second largest one in Northern Germany in terms of population, with some 560,000 inhabitants. Umayyad offers freshly cooked food with authentic Syrian flavors for local customers. He has collaborated with a few refugees, and his family, who could come to Germany to follow him as refugees, supports his business as well.

In the beginning, becoming an entrepreneur was not his intention. Originally, he wanted to work as a lawyer in Germany, based on his degree in law. Muhannad found out, however, quite soon that becoming a lawyer with a foreign degree would not be easy, as his Syrian qualifications are not acknowledged in Germany. It would have been necessary to study again at a university for a several years, which he did not consider as a viable option. Since more than 20 years ago, Muhannad had been working full time as a lawyer and, afterwards, as a sales manager. Work has become an integral part of his identity, and he could not live without it. Therefore, he started to consider becoming an entrepreneur, as it seemed to be a quicker way to start working in Germany.

Being a refugee in a totally new institutional and cultural setting, Muhannad was confronted with a number of challenges. For instance, he could not speak German fluently at that time and did not know anyone outside of the camp. However, the biggest problem was the bureaucratic procedures that one needs to go through to acquire the permission to work as well as to register a firm legally.

With his honest and friendly personality, Muhannad made connections with some local people. He shared his passion and explained his business idea, gaining their support in overcoming institutional barriers.

Muhannad originally wanted to sell authentic Syrian food to other refugees and asylum seekers in Bremen in a food wagon, as he saw that there was considerably high demand among refugees for a taste of their homeland. Although there are a number of Arabic restaurants in the city, his Arabic friends and acquaintances perceived that their food had to be adapted to the preferences of German customers. Together with his German friends, Muhannad developed this business idea. However, after a few months, he gave up pursuing it, as food wagons were deemed too expensive to continuously generate profits.

Soon after, he heard that two entrepreneurs in Bremen were looking for people to open a stand in the market hall in the city center. They wanted to implement a new market concept, with 20 restaurant and food stands in a 1200-square-meter area where regional foods would be offered. Muhannad contacted them to ask if he could open a restaurant stand offering authentic Syrian cuisine. The two entrepreneurs instantly replied to him with an enthusiastic ‘yes’.

2.5 Individual Enablers and Constraints

Muhannad had not been an entrepreneur in Syria and Saudi Arabia. He had many years of experience as a lawyer and sales manager in industry. Although this experience is not directly related to his current business, his previous vocational experience seems to have a positive impact on his entrepreneurial endeavors in Germany. Muhannad has faith in his own capacity, based on his experience: “I worked for 18 years as a sales manager. I have made many companies successful. So ... why can't I make my project successful?”

Another factor enabling Muhannad to start his business within a relatively short time was his entrepreneurial personality. Muhannad is a risk-taker who believes that one cannot be successful if he or she is not ready to take risks. If he were not a risk-taker, he would have not left Saudi Arabia to come all the way to Europe at the risk of his life. Fleeing meant

giving up his stable life and successful business career, yet he did not hesitate to pursue this option in order to secure his family's long-term happiness. He does not fear failure and criticism from others, as the most important thing for him is to make his family happy. Additionally, Muhannad has a strong personal drive to work and earn money by himself. After completing university, Muhannad had been consistently working in industry, making work an essential part of his identity. He could not stand not being able to work and receiving social welfare from the German government. He needed an immediate way to become economically independent, for the sake of his dignity. Furthermore, Muhannad was able to establish a network of connections and make use of social capital within a short time. After arriving in Germany, without knowing anyone, he managed to get to know local people who have supported his entrepreneurial career path.

In addition to his personality, Muhannad has a supportive family. His wife and his children decided to support his decision to become an entrepreneur, and do so both operationally and emotionally.

2.6 Community Enablers and Constraints

Muhannad has received considerable support from the local community in various ways. In fact, he has never experienced discrimination or xenophobia toward refugees or people from Arabic countries in Bremen. By contrast, he received significant support from German society. Without the support from his German friends, it would have been nearly impossible for him to start his business in Germany, due to language barriers and bureaucratic procedures.

He has three German friends who have played important roles in enabling him to start his business in Germany: Christina, Martin and Christian. First, let us tell the story of how Muhannad got to know the married couple, Christina and Martin. Actually, a cat connected him to these German friends. He had a cat which was brought by his relative from Lebanon. The cat was only 45 days old, and he could not take care of it when he arrived in Germany, as the camp did not allow asylum seekers to have pets. Muhannad and his family were at a loss, not knowing

how they could save the life of this little cat. So he decided to hang posters in the city of Bremen to look for someone that could look after it. Christina and Martin found one of Muhannad's posters in the city and instantly decided to contact him to say that they would be ready to adopt the cat, not knowing that Muhannad was a refugee. One day, Muhannad, along with all of his family members, brought the cat to them. This was the beginning of their friendship.

After getting to know each other, Muhannad started sharing his ambition of starting his own business in Germany with them. Luckily enough, Christina and Martin were both self-employed, and entrepreneurship was familiar to them. They were aware of all the bureaucratic processes related to self-employment in Germany, so they immediately understood the institutional barriers that Muhannad would be confronted with as a refugee. As friends and experienced entrepreneurs, they have been supporting Muhannad intensively by discussing business ideas, helping him to write a business plan in German, accompanying him to meetings with local authorities and communicating with local business partners. Their support was indispensable when coping with bureaucracy in Germany.

Christian was another supporter of Muhannad's business from the community. He worked for an NGO that supported the camp where Muhannad was staying in Bremen. The NGO facilitated the repairing of old bicycles so that refugees could use them. Christian helped him by building and purchasing materials and finding information on the Internet.

2.7 Institutional Enablers and Constraints

Given that Muhannad was unable to work as a lawyer in Germany due to the number of requirements needed (i.e., language skills and attending university in Germany for 2–3 more years), he decided to become an entrepreneur.

Even though Muhannad has faced many difficulties during his entrepreneurial journey due to complicated bureaucratic procedures, he still receives support from several institutions.

Muhannad mentioned how important it was for him to have his family beside him. He is first and foremost a family man, a husband and a father. For this reason, he looked for support in reuniting with his family members. The German Embassy did not offer support to his family. However, the Arbeiterwohlfahrt (AWO), a social organization in Germany caring for workers' welfare, which has a branch in Bremen, helped Muhannad to prepare the necessary documents to reunite with his family. Muhannad expressed how expensive it would have been for him to pay for all the airline tickets to bring his family to Germany, especially given that at that time, he only received the small amount of around 400 euros per month in pocket money from the job center. AWO offered Muhannad financial support to be able to buy his family's tickets.

Muhannad felt that the bureaucracy in Bremen was very difficult to deal with, involving submitting several forms, receiving many letters, having to send many letters with signatures and needing to store all bills and documents for several years, as well as having to attend appointments at various institutions both in person and sometimes accompanied by family members. Muhannad was surprised that none of these forms could have been submitted via e-mail or filled out electronically.

However, the job center has offered tremendous support for Muhannad's entrepreneurial endeavor. Even though this was accompanied with submitting a detailed business plan, which includes information that was sometimes difficult to estimate, this led to receiving financial support of 5,000 EUR, as well as the right to register Muhannad as a business owner. Muhannad will not have to pay the money back to the job center.

Another institution that offered Muhannad a financial loan is the Bremer Aufbau-Bank, the regional development bank in Bremen. The Bremer Aufbau-Bank approved Muhannad's loan after analyzing his business plan. The loan amount was 11,400 euros, with a repayment obligation of about two years. Muhannad's nationality or status did not influence his chance of getting the loan. However, his convincing business plan did.

Against this background, Muhannad was not only able to found his business, but to make it a viable endeavor as well.

2.8 Methodological Considerations

Conducting a case study with a refugee entrepreneur came with a few methodological difficulties. The big dilemma that we faced during the interview—and continue to face—was the term “refugee”. At many points it was easy to forget that Muhannad was an entrepreneur and to consider him only as a refugee. Using the term “refugee” had the effect of asking questions and receiving answers unrelated to entrepreneurship. However, we then found out that these questions and answers could be related to the entrepreneurial journey, given that refugees differ from other individuals (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008). One way in which they differ is the trauma that refugees experience after going through their journey to flee their country of origin (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008, Hauff and Vaglum 1993).

Muhannad faced many traumatic events during his flight. For example, when he arrived in Greece, the kind of treatment he faced shocked him. He described this experience: “it was a shock for me. When I went to Greece, I thought it is like Europe. Europe has rights, they deal with human situations in a different way. That was the first shock for me.” He also explained how unsafe the boat trip to Greece was. For almost the entire journey, he was afraid that the boat would sink. He kept himself calm during the boat ride and he continually reminded himself that he was a good swimmer, and that if the boat sank, he could then swim to safety and save a child that was in the boat, too. His wife and children also faced many challenges when trying to get their documents approved to reunite with their husband and father. They still talk to this day of “the bad stories” and how they had to travel from one country to another, and how nobody wanted to “accept them”. At one point, in the procedure of applying to come to Germany, Muhannad’s wife had given up and said that they did not want the visa anymore because she realized that some of requirements they had to fulfill were “not logic”. However, Muhannad mentioned that he does not have any nightmares or suffer from any post-traumatic stress disorder that would potentially affect his business.

References

- BAMF. 2017a. Anzahl der Asylanträge* in Deutschland nach Bundesländern im Jahr 2017**. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/451902/umfrage/asylantraege-in-deutschland-nach-bundeslaendern/>. Accessed 9 Nov 2017.
- . 2017b. Höhe der Kosten des Bundes in Deutschland durch die Flüchtlingskrise von 2016 bis 2017 (in Milliarden Euro). <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/665598/umfrage/kosten-des-bundes-in-deutschland-durch-die-fluechtlingskrise/>. Accessed 9 Nov 2017.
- Die Welt. 2017. Höhe der Kosten* der Bundesländer in Deutschland durch die Flüchtlingskrise im Jahr 2016 (in Milliarden Euro). <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/665610/umfrage/kosten-der-bundeslaender-in-deutschland-durch-die-fluechtlingskrise/>. Accessed 9 Nov 2017.
- Hauff, Edvard, and Per Vaglum. 1993. Integration of Vietnamese refugees into the Norwegian labor market: The impact of war trauma. *International Migration Review* 27: 388–405.
- Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, e.V. 2015. *Zielland Deutschland. Hintergründe zu Flüchtlingen und Einwanderung*. Berlin: Sankt Augustin.
- Light, Ivan, Parminder Bhachu, and Stavros Karageorgis. 1993. Migration networks and immigrant entrepreneurship. In *Immigration and entrepreneurship: Culture, capital, and ethnic networks*, 25–50. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- UNHCR. 2017a. Figures at a glance. <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>. Accessed 9 Nov 2017.
- . 2017b. Ranking der zehn Länder mit den meisten aufgenommenen Flüchtlingen (Stand: Ende 2016). <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/12786/umfrage/aufnahmeländer-von-fluechtlingen/>. Accessed 9 Nov 2017.
- Wauters, Bram, and Johan Lambrecht. 2008. Barriers to refugee entrepreneurship in Belgium: Towards an explanatory model. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34: 895–915.