



Mohamad al-Kour: “Refugees are human resources. Supporting them is a win-win strategy”

Antoine Saint-Denis, AEIDL

Antoine Saint-Denis speaks with Mohamad al-Kour, a Syrian refugee who has been living in Belgium for the past 18 months. Mohamad explains his reasons for leaving Syria, tells the story of his long journey to and through Europe, and talks about his new life in his newly adopted country.



Mohamad, can you tell me in a few words who you are?

I am Mohamad al-Kour, a 28 year-old interior architect from Damascus. I left Syria in August 2015, when the revolution became a civil war and my personal situation was becoming more and more complicated.

Why did you leave Syria?

I took the decision to leave Syria after I was investigated twice by the Syrian intelligence services. I was stopped many times at army check points, especially during the summer of 2015.

They provoked me, threatened me and insulted. They put pressure on me to join what they call an "army committee", an organisation created by local people to assist the Syrian army. They did this, despite the fact that I was not obliged by law to go to the army (e.g. when you don't have brothers, like me, you don't have to join the army). The government's view is that we have to protect the country and be part of the regime. My uncle was arrested and held for a day at the Mazzeh military airport. A few weeks later, a friend of mine and I noticed that we were being watched by the intelligence services. We knew that they were looking for evidence to arrest us. My friend is now in Germany; he left Syria one week before me.

The situation in Damascus was rather sensitive and they needed to keep it in control. This is why they were careful not to arrest people without evidence in Damascus. They kept telling the public they were only arresting terrorists, whereas in other cities arrests were made randomly, with or without evidence. They knew from my name and ID card that I was a Sunni and that I came from an anti Bashar al-Assad family. There is a kind of social and ethnic structure in Syria: if you are from Lattakia, it means that you support the government, but if you are from Damascus and are a Sunni, you are always treated with suspicion.

They know that Sunnis make up the majority of the inhabitants of Damascus, and that Alawites are in the minority, and if there were true elections, Bashar al-Assad would not stay in power. But they want the world to believe that the majority is with him. To do that, they trace the Sunnis, kill them, or arrest them and force them to leave the country.

It was terrifying to be a Sunni. They don't want Sunnis in Syria, so we had three options: either we got arrested and eventually died; we joined the army and fought with them (and those who opted for the latter were put in the front lines during the clashes and got killed); or we left the country.

It must have been a hard decision and then a hard road to Europe...

Yes, the decision to leave Syria was difficult because it was linked to two main issues which had prevented me of leaving earlier - money and diploma.

The day I left I remember counting the army security check points one by one with the constant terror of being arrested. I was abused by the Hezbollah on the Lebanese-Syrian border, because they are in the government and they control all the main ports and borders. I was also harassed at the airport. The moment I crossed the Lebanese-Syrian border, the air was different, it smelt different, I was relieved, I felt I was free again, alive, but still I was afraid of the Lebanese border guards because many Syrians have been arrested there because they are suspected of being against Hezbollah and Al Assad.

When I arrived in Turkey I was feeling more secure. Still, I knew it was not a safe place anymore either, as Turkey has also entered the war. We already see the numbers of bombings taking place in Turkey, and it's possible the situation will become even more dangerous.



Crossing the Aegean Sea.

I crossed the sea in a rubber boat with 57 other refugees, from different cities in Syria. We were all Syrians, we made three attempts and on the last one, after seven hours at sea, we succeeded in getting to Samos, a small Greek island near Turkey. It was terrifying. An uncertain future awaited us all. Either we would be sent back to Turkey; we would die at sea, or we would be lucky and reach the Greek island. When I arrived I was so happy that I made it, and that I was finally in a safe place, a different continent, far away from the Middle East and its problems and its culture.

In Samos, I met Frank Van Goolen, a Belgian who was on vacation with his daughter. We became friends and he helped me. When I arrived later in Belgium, he hosted me for eight months, while I waited for my situation to be regularised.

I went to Athens, then to Serbia through Macedonia. I was stuck in Serbia for a couple days because the Hungarian border was closed. I was told by activists that I met there not to go through Hungary because it was not safe anymore, but rather to go through Croatia. So I was among the first who crossed the Croatian border. After I made my way through the fields to the first village, I was stopped by the police. They arrested me and took me to a prison. It was Friday morning, and they wanted to keep me in jail for the weekend until my case could be heard in court the following Monday. I felt bad, and disappointed, not knowing what would happen. It was hard to believe that after escaping Syria to avoid arrest, I now found myself under arrest in Europe, alone, with nobody to help me. But after a few hours they sent me back to Serbia.

Then the Croatian government allowed refugees to cross the country, but I changed my mind that night, after I saw so many people going to Germany. I knew it was not a good decision to go there anymore. So after Croatia, I went to Slovenia, where I met up again with the activists I had seen in Hungary. I volunteered to help them, distributing food, water and milk to families and other refugees. I helped with translations and Red Cross first aid. From there, I eventually moved on to Austria and then through Germany to Belgium. The day I arrived in Belgium it really felt great to know I was alive, safe and that I had made it to Europe. I still can't believe it today! I still think it's a dream when I wake up in the morning!



At the Serbia-Hungary border.

How has your life evolved since October 2015?

The first three months were very difficult. Everything was new, I had to adapt to living in a new country with new laws. I had to make plans, follow certain procedures, and to wait for my refugee status, which took a long time - approximately 8 months. I didn't experience the cultural shocks

that many other refugees did, however. I was lucky that I met supportive people like you, Antoine, who I met two days after my arrival. This meant that I had a place to stay in Brussels on my first night, because in order to apply for asylum, I had to queue the next morning from 5 a.m.

Since that time we have developed a strong friendship. Also, living with Frank helped me to integrate faster into the Belgian culture, learning about the traditions, laws and many important things that a newcomer needs to know.

After three months, I started taking Dutch lessons, which I combined with an Integration course. I wanted to do this as fast as possible in order to get back to the normal life I had before the war in Syria. When I got my refugee status things became a bit easier: I was able to make more concrete plans, knowing exactly what I wanted to do, where I was going to live, and how I would get myself more and more involved in Belgian society.



Mohamad al-Kour and Antoine Saint-Denis.

What difficulties have you confronted in Belgium?

The greatest difficulty was the waiting. It took a long time for each and every procedure. Learning two languages was also not easy, and it was financially difficult. It was also difficult to find a training opportunity in order to develop a career. The main challenge is that a refugee must deal with everything at the same time; things that people normally do step by step as they grow up in a particular society. Being a refugee means you have to deal with many things simultaneously: work, education, developing contacts, expanding your knowledge, language, everyday life like everyone else, and added to this is the stress and uncertainty of your situation. In the end, being a refugee doesn't make us feel lucky or happy but we learn to be satisfied and accept life for what

it is. We only live once, and when you are in your twenties you would like to travel, enjoy life, pursue your hobbies, but for us we don't have time for this, we lost this opportunity in our country of origin, and here, every day we struggle and fight for a normal life again, to be like everyone else. I am also worried about my papers for next year, as I have only received subsidiary protection, which must be renewed next June. I don't know if it will be renewed or not. This uncertain situation is worrying. I sometimes feel despair because it is very difficult to work on plans, and have stability when there is so much uncertainty.



With Antoine's son in Brussels.

What are your occupations today?

I am doing a Masters programme at Hasselt University, called "Interior architecture adaptive reuse". This has given me the opportunity to learn more about Belgian society and history. The curriculum deals with renovating old and valuable sites and churches in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe, so we need to learn about history.

I also volunteer with different NGOs that help and support other refugees, and I am studying about social enterprise online. I also became part of the ['Techfugees'](#) initiative in Belgium and I am learning French and improving my Dutch.

Recently, I joined a project called [RISE](#), the aim of which is to support refugees all over Europe. We held a [workshop in Athens](#) and it was kind of funny and strange for me to be back there, legally with a Belgian ID card, helping refugees. I owe a lot to Belgian society and I will do my best to see what I can do in return, to give something back.

I also had a wonderful opportunity to protest against the Syrian dictatorship again, but this time in Brussels, knowing that I was safe and had the freedom to express myself and call for human rights, freedom, dignity, equality, civil law, and civil authority that is kept apart from religion.

Soon I will publish a book about my trip, the challenges and difficulties we faced during our journey, life in Syria, and how it is to live in a dictatorship. The book will be called "The Pursuit of Freedom".

What are your plans now?

I am currently looking for a training opportunity in an architectural firm. I'd like to mix the different approach to architecture in the Middle East and in Europe, and to learn construction and building here in Belgium, so that I can create my own business. I am trying to become an entrepreneur, which is one of my dreams.

I have also been admitted to another Masters programme at KU Leuven University, which I will do next year, and I will see if I can get a chance to do a PhD. I am also doing my best to learn French and to improve my Dutch.

What would you like to say to policy makers?

Refugees in Belgium have to overcome many challenges. Through the RISE project we have carried out group consultations with refugees to map these challenges. I represent the Belgian national contact point for this project. We concluded that the main challenges concern accommodation, education, family reunification, access to the job market, and integration as a whole. It is very important to point out that refugees are human resources and if they are well supported by the Belgian government, it will lead to a win-win situation. But of course refugees must also work hard and show that they can gain the trust of the government and society.

(Interview conducted in English in February 2017)

Dealing with officialdom

Jean-Luc Janot, AEIDL

Our colleague, Antoine Saint-Denis, met Mohamad al-Kour on his first day in Belgium. Like many other Belgian citizens, Antoine and his wife had volunteered to give provisional shelter to asylum seekers in their home, to compensate for the inability of public authorities to meet the urgent needs of these people, who had been deprived of everything.

One year later, Mohamad had become a tenant in the house. "This proximity makes daily contacts easy, with support when needed. It also gives a feeling of being included and recognised. The warmth of a home is a unique asset for empowerment," says Mohamad.

But Mohamad's first year in Belgium was not an easy one, which was quite an eye-opener for Antoine: "As a former policy-maker in the social field, I am committed to effective access to rights. Unfortunately, the gap between official intentions and reality is often huge. It took Mohamad hours, sometimes days, to get minimal information. It took ten months to get a residence card. He had to live on his own resources during all this time. He finally got the installation allowance he was entitled to more than a year after his arrival. Last June he applied for a work permit, which he only received in January. Even for somebody as skilled and proactive as Mohamed, coping with all this represents a daily challenge and it has resulted in many missed opportunities. Bureaucracy in social and other public services often is largely responsible for these delays and inconsistencies. All this should be more strategic and more responsive. Serious improvements are needed. I am afraid, however, that the behaviour within these institutions reflects the ambivalent feelings within our societies generally towards refugees. Our principles encompass the granting of asylum, but we are frequently reluctant to go further and give people what they actually need to integrate and become fully autonomous. This is a huge waste, not only for them, but for the whole society."

Asylum in Belgium

Belgian law provides for two types of protection status:

- the **refugee status**, in accordance with the Geneva Convention, which is granted to asylum seekers who can prove that they have fled their country because they fear persecution based on race, nationality, religion, membership of a particular social group or political opinion;
- the **subsidiary protection status**, which is granted to persons who apply for asylum because they are in a dangerous situation in their country, but do not qualify as refugees.

In 2016, 12 197 people became refugees in Belgium, and 3 281 more were given subsidiary protection.

During the asylum procedure, asylum seekers are not entitled to financial assistance, but are offered accommodation in a reception centre, which provides food, housing and €7.40 per week (less than €30 per month!). They are not allowed to work.

Since July 2015, the EU regulations oblige Member States to give access to their labour market no later than nine months after the receipt of a request for international protection. Belgium has decided to allow people to work after four months, on the condition that they apply for a work permit. The European Commission advocates the earliest access to the labour market: living for months in asylum centres often creates additional problems for refugees. The earlier the integration process starts, the better the eventual outcomes.

Once recognised as a refugee or a beneficiary of the subsidiary protection, you are entitled to receive a resident's permit. With this permit you are allowed to work or, if you do not have a job, to seek assistance from a municipal social welfare centre (CPAS) and to receive Social Integration Income (RIS): €470 per month for people cohabiting, €710 for a single person, and €940 for a person with family dependents.

More information: Fedasil (<http://fedasil.be/en/content/asylum-belgium>), Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (<http://www.cgra.be/en>), European Commission (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2041_en.htm) and RTBF (https://www.rtf.be/info/dossier/les-refugies-et-moi-les-reponses-a-vos-questions/detail_combien-les-refugies-recoivent-ils-d-argent?id=9092598)