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Agafoshin, M. M.; Gorokhov, S. A.; Dmitriev, R. V.

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REFUGEES FROM SYRIA AND IRAQ IN SWEDEN: RESETTLEMENT DURING THE MIGRATION CRISIS

M. M. Agafoshin 

S. A. Gorokhov 

R. V. Dmitriev 

¹Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences
30/1 Spiridonovka St., Moscow, 123001, Russia

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The vast increase in the number of forced migrants during the European migration crisis has compelled the receiving countries to concentrate on the issues of migrant reception and accommodation. This study aims to demonstrate how the patterns of settlement of Syrian and Iraqi migrants changed in 2014–2019. We propose a new methodology, building on the Herfindahl-Hirschman index, an indicator of the level and direction of the spatial concentration—deconcentration of migrants, and the Ryabtsev index, which is used to measure the proximity between the settlement structures of migrants and the Swedes. It is established there was a deconcentration of migrants during the crisis (especially in its ascendant phase), carried out by the Swedish authorities. However a reverse process took place in the descendant phase, as a result of self-arranged migrants' resettlement. The deconcentration of Iraqis and Syrians led to the convergence between the settlement structure typical of immigrants and the Swedes, whilst concentration resulted in divergence accompanied by the emergence of close-knit immigrant communities on the outskirts of Sweden's largest cities. The formation of such communities, seen as vulnerable by the national authorities and marked by a high crime rate, impedes the integration of Syrian and Iraqi immigrants into Swedish society.

Keywords:

European migration crisis, Sweden, refugees, resettlement, vulnerable areas

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of migrants in the world has grown by more than 100 million, amounting to 281 million in 2022;¹ labour migrants make up the

¹ World Migration Report 2022, 2022, IOM, URL: <https://publications.iom.int> (access date: 10.07.2022).

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largest share — about two thirds of all migrants.² At the same time, the number of forced migrants has increased dramatically in recent decades: the difficulties of their adaptation to the host societies, along with the weak control of refugee flows, put migration high on today's agenda.

The European migration crisis, ushered by the rapid growth in the number of refugees coming to Europe since 2014, has been showing the complexity of solving migration issues.³ At the height of the crisis, in 2015—2016, 2.5 million refugees came to the European Union, herein former residents of just two Middle East countries — Syria and Iraq — accounted for nearly 40% of all newcomers.⁴ Such an unprecedented increase of migrants has posed a serious systemic challenge to EU nations, revealing existing flaws in the realization of the EU's migration and regional policies [1; 2]. According to the Dublin Regulation⁵ Greece and Italy, as countries crossed by major migration routes from the Middle East to the EU, had to process a major portion of asylum claims. Such uneven distribution of forced migrants across the EU countries led to the issue of directives on the resettlement of them from Greece and Italy.⁶ The initiative to resettle migrants across the EU became a serious challenge to intra-European solidarity, causing negative reactions primarily by Eastern European member states, which essentially refused to accept refugees despite the directives [3; 4]. The European migration crisis threw into the spotlight not only political disagreements across the EU but also socio-cultural problems related to the adaptation of Muslim migrants and refugees in the countries that accepted the largest numbers of them: Germany, Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark [5—9].

One of the most important integration factors of immigrants with a different cultural background is the structure of their settlement on the territory of the host state [10]. In most cases, their settling is very inhomogeneous [11]: high concentration of migrants within the large urban agglomerations of Europe lead to the rise of neighbourhoods characterized by spatial exclusion and social segregation of non-native ethnic and religious communities [12; 13].

² Global Issues. Migration, 2022, *United Nations*, URL: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/migration> (accessed 10.07.2022).

³ In this article, the chronological framework of the European migration crisis covers the period 2014—2019.

⁴ Asylum and first-time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex — annual aggregated data (rounded), 2022, *Eurostat*, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/migr_asyappctza (accessed 01.05.2022).

⁵ Regulation (EU) N° 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2013, *EUR-Lex*, URL: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2013/604/2013-06-29> (accessed 10.04.2022).

⁶ Council Decision (EU) 2015/1601 of 22 September 2015 establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece, 2015, *EUR-Lex*, URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2015/1601/oj> (accessed 19.02.2022).

The aim of the study is to identify changes in settlement patterns of Syrian and Iraqi migrants in Sweden in 2014–2019. In line with the aim, the following tasks are solved in the study: 1) to identify differences in the resettlement of Syrian and Iraqi migrants, on the one hand, and Swedes (locals) on the other, developed as a result of the migration crisis; 2) to reveal changes in the Swedish migration policy due to necessity to accept and accommodate significant numbers of migrants.

Materials and methodology

The following factors explain the choice of Sweden as the research ground.

1. The country has a long history of receiving and accommodating migrants with different cultural backgrounds. Prior to the early 1980s most labour migrants came to Sweden generally from Northern, Western and Southern Europe [14]. Regulating migration was handled by the Labour Market Board, which dealt with the issues of hiring immigrants, helped to adapt and provided them with housing [15]. The intensification of refugee flows and the increase in the migration burden on the largest Swedish cities in the 1980s led to the establishment of the Swedish Migration Agency, which in 1985 began implementing the ‘Sweden-wide strategy’ (‘Hela Sverige strategin’). The Strategy’s objective was to facilitate migrants’ integration into society by distributing them more evenly across the country — settling them from large into medium and small-population communes of the country that had enough housing stock and unfilled vacancies [16]. Persons who were granted refugee status were provided with social housing in a certain commune, where they had to live for 18 months in a row, although if such persons relocated, they were not fined or other penalties.

The authorities abandoned the ‘Sweden-wide strategy’ in 1994 adopting a new law on asylum seekers,⁷ which offered them two options — either to be accommodated in social housing provided by the Swedish Migration Agency (‘Anläggningsboende’, ABO) or to live in accommodations of their own choosing (‘Eget boende’, EBO). Refugees who opted for the ABO option did not have the opportunity to choose a municipality of residence and were usually placed in sparsely populated communes; and those who chose the EBO option usually settled with friends or relatives in more densely populated communes [17–19]. All categories of refugees, irrespective of the housing option they chose, were granted financial aid by the state. Those who opted for the EBO, however, were entitled only to a daily allowance and had to cover much of the housing costs by themselves. The country’s authorities expected that only a small part of the newly arrived refugees would find housing on their own, however, have shown that in the pre-crisis period of 1998–2010, more than 50% of the forced migrants chose the EBO, which led to the rise of segregated areas densely populated by migrants [20; 21].

⁷ Lag om mottagande av asylsökande m.fl, 1994, *SFS-nummer 1994:137*, URL: <https://rkrattsbaser.gov.se/sfst?bet=1994:137> (accessed 12.05.2022).

The growing migration burden experienced by Sweden during the European migration crisis, as well as the problems of refugee resettlement, exacerbated by the criminalization of migrant neighbourhoods, called for changes in the country's migration policies. One of the steps in this direction was the law on the reception of newly arrived immigrants adopted on March 1, 2016: according to this law, all Swedish municipalities were obliged to accommodate refugees.⁸ The number of refugees to be sent to particular communes was to be determined based on the situation on the labour market, the size of a particular commune's territory, and the number of asylum seekers already hosted by the commune. In 2020, as a result of amendments to the 1994 Law,⁹ according to which those refugees who want to settle independently in the 32 areas marked by the state as 'socially and economically vulnerable' are no longer eligible for state financial assistance [22].

2. Based on the principles of its migration policy, Sweden, which positions itself as a 'humanitarian superpower' [23], took in the highest number of Syrian and Iraqi refugees per capita among the EU states during the migration crisis [24], and in terms of absolute numbers Sweden took in over 140 thousand person — more than any other EU country except Germany.

3. The reception of people with alien cultural backgrounds, including migrants from Syria and Iraq, leads to a growth of the Muslim community, which has become the 'second majority' in the country. The share of Muslims in the religious population of Sweden, according to our estimate, is 14 % (950 thousand people) [14]. The Swedish authorities were among the first in the EU to recognize the presence territories with a high crime rate and large share of migrants in the population — 'vulnerable areas'¹⁰ where the state monopoly on power has actually been lost.

The research is based on official data of Statistics Sweden (SCB), containing information about the structure of migration to Sweden, the origin of the population and the placement of migrants by the country's administrative-territorial units.¹¹

Transformations of the migrant settlement patterns across a certain territory are conditioned by the intensity of spatial concentration/deconcentration. The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) uses as the main indicator characterizing the structure of migrant accommodation in Sweden (in top-level administrative subdivisions such as counties (läns)):

⁸ Lag om mottagande av vissa nyanlända invandrare för bosättning, 2016, *SFS-nummer 2016:38* URL: <https://rkrattsbaser.gov.se/sfst?bet=2016:38> (accessed 12.05.2022).

⁹ Lag om ändring i lagen (1994:137) om mottagande av asylsökande m.fl, 2019, *SFS-nummer 2019:1204*. URL: <https://svenskfattningssamling.se/sites/default/files/sfs/2019-12/SFS2019-1204.pdf> (accessed 12.05.2022).

¹⁰ Utsatta områden — polisens arbete, *Polisen*, 2022, URL: <https://polisen.se/om-polisen/polisens-arbete/utsatta-omraden> (accessed 15.06.2022).

¹¹ *Statistiska centralbyrån (SCB)*, 2022, URL: <https://www.scb.se> (accessed 25.06.2022).

$$HHI = \sum_{i=1}^N S_i^2,$$

where S_i — the share (%) of a particular county's migrant population in the country's migrant population; N — is the number of counties.

The values of this index running from $10000/N$ to 10000 make it possible to measure the degree of migrants' concentration. The comparison of corresponding indexes for a period under review shows changes in concentration. A higher value signals a greater spatial concentration of migrants and vice versa.

Migrants' movements from Syria and Iraq to Sweden during the crisis were conducted mainly not by air, but by land — via Denmark, as well as the specifics of the inner Sweden migrants' movements and peculiarities of Swedish migration policies, led to differences between the settlement patterns of Swedes on the one hand and migrants on the other. The Ryabtsev Index of relative structural shifts (I_r) applies to measure the changes in 2014–2019:

$$I_r = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (k_m - k_s)^2}{\sum_{i=1}^n (k_m + k_s)^2}}$$

where n is the number of second-level administrative subdivisions (communes); k_m is the share of each commune's migrant population in the overall population of Syrian and/or Iraqi migrants in Sweden; k_s — is the share of each of n communes in the population of Swedes.

The advantage of the Ryabtsev Index, compared with the other indicators of absolute or relative structural shifts, implies primarily the presence of the scale of values (within the interval $[0; 1]$), permitting a qualitative interpretation of results obtained [25]. The lower the value of the index, the closer the migrants' patterns of settlement across communes to those of locals.

In order to identify the peculiarities of Syrian and Iraqi migrants' settlement patterns to those of Swedes, the differences between which were brought into sharp relief during the migration crisis, we combine all 290 communes of the country into 10 groups — deciles, each with more or less equal population size. The first decile, consisting of only one commune (Stockholm), is not considered due to the anomaly of the front 'tail' of the distribution — by analogy with that under Zipf's law. This anomalous 'tail' is the result of the distribution of the communes across deciles bottom up, with the share of each subsequent group deviating more strongly from the ideal 10% (especially in the first decile).

Results and Discussion

The first Iraqis and Syrians, according to SCB, arrived in the country in the 1950s and 1960s; however, by 1980 they numbered only slightly more than 2.2 thousand people. Since the 1980s, a period of more active immigration to Sweden began (Table 1). The country received several waves of refugees — primarily from Iraq, due to the worsening political and economic situation in the Middle East [26], as well as armed conflicts, such as the Iran-Iraq War in 1980—1988, the Gulf War in 1990—1991, the invasion of the Coalition forces in Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing Iraq War in 2003—2011 [27; 28].

Table 1

**Syrian and Iraqi populations size in Sweden
in 1950—2020, persons**

Country of origin	Year							
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Syria	0	6	100	1,606	5,874	14,162	20,758	193,594
Iraq	5	16	108	631	9,818	49,372	121,761	146,440

Source: Compiled by the authors based on: *Folkmängd Efter Födelseland*.¹²

By 2014, when the migration crisis began, Sweden was home to 197.8 thousand citizens of Iraq and Syria, with Iraqis outnumbering Syrians by two-to-one. The structure of their settlement that had developed over the previous decades was characterized by significant unevenness: 64.2 % of Iraqis and 50.8 % of Syrians lived in 3 out of 21 counties: Stockholm, Västra Götalands, and Skåne.¹³

Arising from the European migration crisis, by 2019 Syrians and Iraqis had become the largest ethnic minorities in Sweden, pushing Finns, who had been the country's largest minority since the beginning of the 20th century, into third place. Despite the fact that by the end of the crisis period the mentioned counties continued to have the country's largest shares of Syrians and Iraqis (Fig. 1), the settlement patterns of each of these two migrant communities had been marked by deconcentration across the country during previous five years (Table 2).

¹² *Folkmängd Efter Födelseland 1900—2021*, *Statistiska Centralbyrån (SCB)*, 2022, URL: <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/pong/tabell-och-diagram/utrikes-fodda-medborgarskap-och-utlandskvensk-bakgrund/folkmangd-efter-fodelseland-19002021/> (accessed 10.02.2022).

¹³ In these 3 counties lived 50.3 % Swedes.

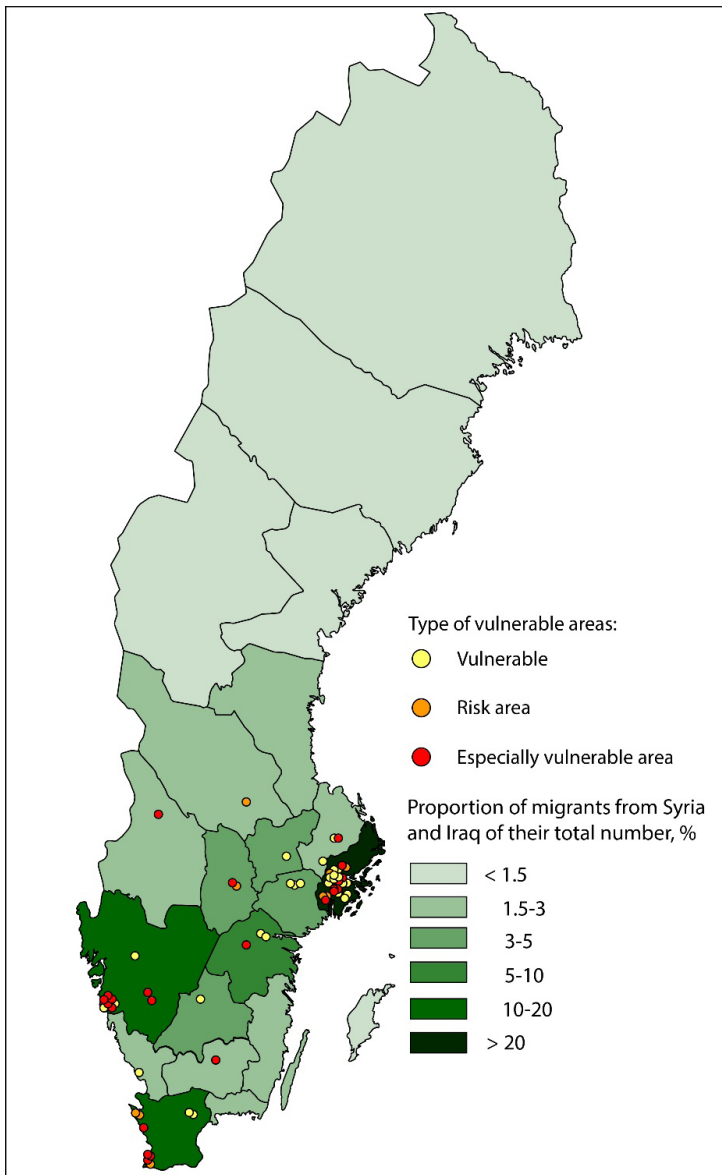


Fig. 1. Structure of resettlement of migrants from Syria and Iraq across counties and 'vulnerable areas' of Sweden, 2019

Source: Compiled by the authors based on: Folkmängden efter region, födelseland och kön;¹⁴ Kriminell påverkan i lokalsamhället.¹⁵

¹⁴ Folkmängden efter region, födelseland och kön. År 2000–2021, *Statistiska Centralbyrån (SCB), 2022*, URL: https://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/sv/ssd/START_BE_BE0101_BE0101E/FolkmRegFlandK/ (accessed 14.03.2022).

¹⁵ Kriminell påverkan i lokalsamhället — En lägesbild för utvecklingen i utsatta områden, *Polisen, 2019*, URL: https://polisen.se/siteassets/dokument/ovriga_rapporter/kriminell-paverkan-i-lokalsamhallet.pdf (accessed 13.07.2022).

Table 2

**Spatial concentration of Iraqi and Syrian migrants,
and Swedes, across counties, 2014–2019**

HHI by population group	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Migrants from Iraq	1640.2	1639.0	1630.1	1608.3	1606.2	1599.8
Migrants from Syria	1149.6	988.4	898.7	932.5	937.4	936.0
Swedes	1027.4	1032.1	1035.7	1038.1	1040.5	1042.9

Source: data for the calculation here and below (unless stated otherwise) is based on: folkmängden efter region, födelseland och kön.¹⁶

The Syrian community experienced significant deconcentration, as the share of Stockholm County in the total population of Syrians in Sweden fell sharply (from 24.6 % in 2014 to 16 % in 2019), at the same time the share of Syrians living in southern counties grew (Skåne, Halland, Kalmar, Kronoberg, Jönköping) due to migrants during the crisis increasingly were coming to Sweden from its southern border — via Denmark. It is noteworthy that the deconcentration of Syrians across counties reached its peak not before or after but at the height of the crisis, in 2016, the year when the migrants' settlement law was adopted and they started to get settled across the country more evenly.

The Iraqis structure of settlement is marked by a higher degree of concentration compared to the Syrians' because a significant part of Iraqis arrived before the crisis in the country in 2000–2010 their settlement patterns across the country was more stable. During the crisis, the Iraqis' concentration level reduced because the share of Iraqis in their total population declined in Stockholm County (from 31.3 % to 30.7 %), and also in Örebro and Gävleborg. At the same time, the share of Dalarna County grew (by 2 %) as a result of determinate efforts to redistribute refugees [29].

The settlement of Iraqi and Syrian refugees changed not only at the level of counties, but also at the level of communes. The migration crisis initiated the process of convergence of distribution patterns of Swedes and migrants across communes, and after the height of the crisis, the trend reversed to divergence (Table 3). The convergence of the settlement structures of Syrians and Swedes reached its maximum in 2017 — the first year when the flow of migrants from Syria decreased. It was the result of the Swedish Migration Agency's efforts to distribute Syrian refugees more evenly in social housing provided by host communes (ABO). The incoming refugees were systemically steered first of all to

¹⁶ Folkmängden efter region, födelseland och kön. År 2000 — 2021, *Statistiska Centralbyrån (SCB)*, 2022, URL: https://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/sv/ssd/START_BE_BE0101_BE0101E/FolkmRegFlandK/ (accessed 14.03.2022).

the country's small communes (8th, 9th and 10th deciles), and the share of these communes' migrant population in Sweden's total migrant population grew from 28.6 % in 2014 to 39 % in 2016 (Fig. 2).

Table 3

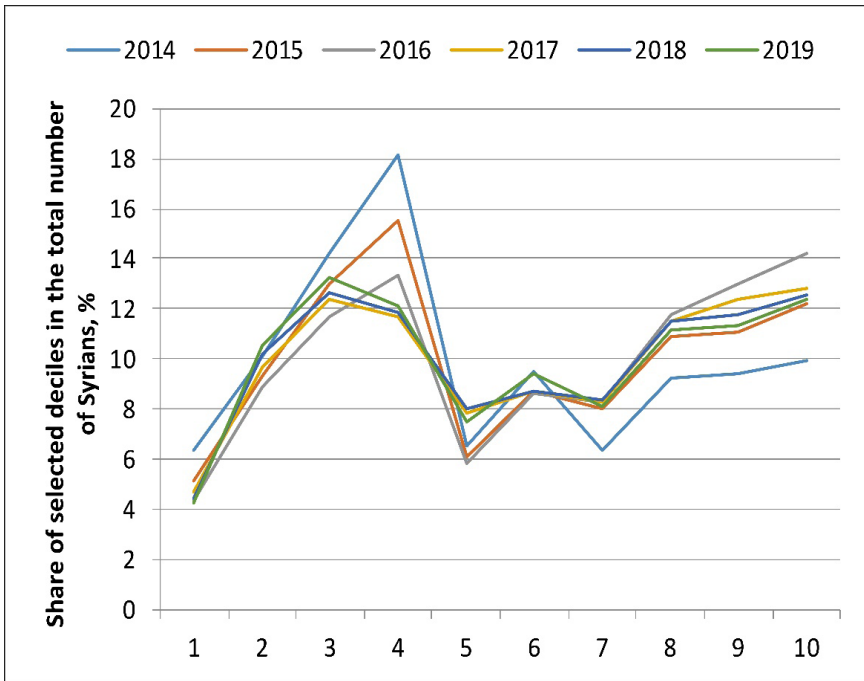
**The degree of difference between the settlement structures
of Swedes and migrants from Syria and Iraq by communes, 2014–2019**

Year	Average population size of groups in communes, persons			I_r of migrants' populations and Swedes across communes		
	Large (2 nd –4 th deciles)	Midsize (5 th –7 th deciles)	Small (8 th –10 th deciles)	Migrants from Syria	Migrants from Iraq	Migrants from Syria and Iraq, combined
2014	93,567– 560,199	33,484– 91,238	2,445– 33,130	0.376	0.348	0.319
2015				0.351	0.345	0.295
2016				0.329	0.342	0.266
2017				0.298	0.334	0.256
2018				0.305	0.331	0.258
2019				0.311	0.328	0.262

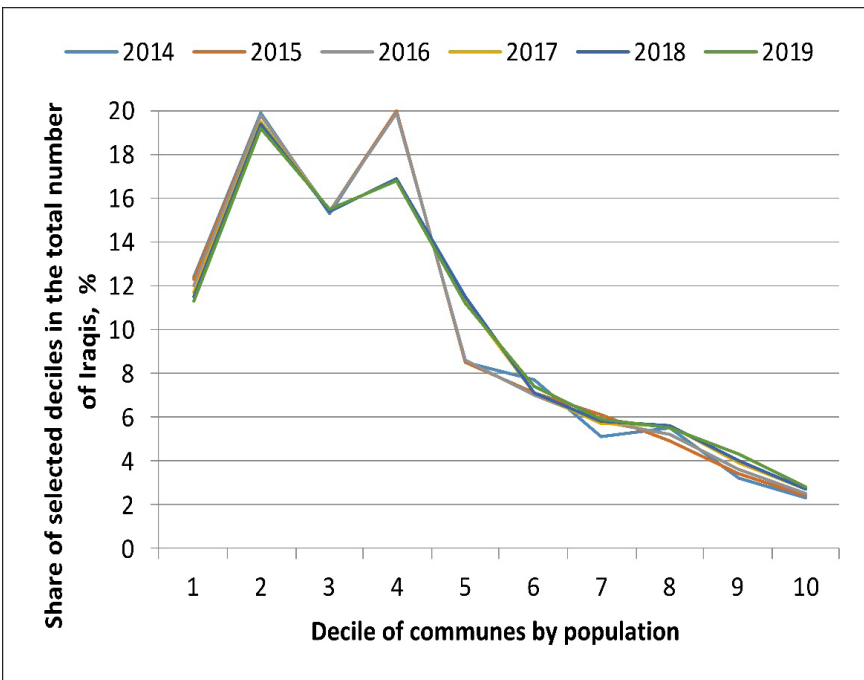
The growth of differences in the settlement of Swedes and migrants since 2018 is associated with the activation of self-organization processes in the settlement of Syrians. The results of this study are in line with the conclusions reached by scholars from Stockholm, who argue that refugees steered to ABO in 2005–2009, even during the first years of their stay in the country, quite often moved from small towns/rural areas to large urban centres [30]. Thus, we can state the long-term nature of this trend in the self-organization of refugee resettlement in Sweden.

By the beginning of the crisis, the distribution of Iraqis across the country's communes was marked by an even higher level of concentration in large communes than among Syrians. In 2014–2019, the distribution of Iraqis, however, was more even (while the population size of small communes was slightly growing) – this is explained by the fact that during the crisis Sweden took in relatively few Iraqis, as compared to the 2000s. A significant increase in the Iraqi population in midsize communes (5th decile) in 2016–2017 is explained by the fact that some communes moved from the 4th decile to the 5th. Thus, the redistribution of Iraqis within Sweden during the migration crisis was by and large in line with a trajectory formed before the start of the crisis.

The settling of Syrians and Iraqis in large urban communes, primarily the three 'metropolitan' counties (Fig. 2), as well as the preponderance of 'foreign-faith' migrants, mostly Muslims, in the migrant population, is a handicap to their integration in Swedish society, which is highly secularized [31; 32].



a



b

Fig. 2. Distribution of Syrians (*a*) and Iraqis (*b*) across deciles of communes in Sweden, 2014–2019

Most vulnerable areas are situated precisely in the country's biggest urban centres¹⁷ (see Fig. 1). These areas are a Swedish version of the 'no-go-zones', which lately have become quite common in many European cities and which can be regarded as a form of spatial exclusion of migrant, primarily Muslim, populations in the EU countries [33]. Swedish government institutionalized the concept of 'vulnerable areas' precisely when the inflow of refugees rose sharply in 2014. The Swedish authorities divided the areas marked as vulnerable into three categories, depending on the acuteness of social problems they experience and their crime rates: vulnerable areas, risk areas, and especially vulnerable areas.

By 2019, 27.5 % of Sweden's Iraqis and 15.8 % of Sweden's Syrians lived in vulnerable areas¹⁸, which testified to a high level of their spatial exclusion. The level of spatial exclusion was particularly high in three counties where the largest cities are situated: vulnerable areas of Stockholm were home to 47.1 % of Iraqis and 37.7 % of Syrians residing in Stockholm County; vulnerable areas of Västra Götaland had 56 % and 48.5 % of the county's Iraqis and Syrians, respectively; and Skåne's vulnerable areas was home to 34.4 % of the county's Iraqis and 30.3 % of the county's Syrians. The government marked 22 vulnerable areas with a combined population of 200,000 people as especially vulnerable: these areas include Husby in Stockholm, Ronna/Geneta/Lina in Södertälje, Hjällbo in Gothenburg, Rosengård in Malmö, Kronogården in Trollhättan and some other localities with high shares of Iraqis and Syrians among their residents¹⁹. Swedish authorities essentially have no control over these areas while representatives of ethnic and religious minorities perform the functions of oversight²⁰.

Conclusion

The precipitous growth in the number of refugees from Syria and Iraq arriving in Europe has demonstrated flaws in the migration and regional policies of the EU, whose member states have ultimately failed to work out a consensual solution to the problem of distributing the flows of refugees and settling them across the EU. The lack of solutions exacerbated the political and social tensions in the EU countries.

During the European migration crisis, migrants' resettlement within Sweden — the country that took in the largest number of refugees per capita among

¹⁷ Swed. utsatta områden.

¹⁸ And only 1.9 % of all Swedes.

¹⁹ *Fakta för förändring: demografi och boende*, 2019, Stockholm: Stiftelsen The Global Village, 84 p. URL: <https://theglobalvillage.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Fakta-för-förändring-Final-version.pdf> (accessed 13.07.2022).

²⁰ *Kriminell påverkan i lokalsamhället — En lägesbild för utvecklingen i utsatta områden, Polisen*, 2019, URL: https://polisen.se/siteassets/dokument/ovriga_rapporter/kriminell-paverkan-i-lokalsamhallet.pdf (accessed 13.07.2022).

all EU states — was characterized by spatial deconcentration. The deconcentration trend was especially strong in the Syrian migrant community, reaching its peak in 2016, after which it reversed to a concentration trend. In turn, the settlement of Iraqis was characterized by a more uniform deconcentration throughout the period.

The convergence in resettlement on the level of communes among Swedes on the one hand and migrants from Syria and Iraq on the other took place precisely during the most active phase of the migration crisis in 2015—2016 and reached its zenith in 2017 — the first year of the reduction of the migration flow to the country. The reason for the convergence of the settlement structures of migrants and Swedes occurred the fact of newly arrived refugees' redistribution during the active phase of the crisis into small-population communes, carried out by the Swedish Migration Agency. Later, in 2018, a sharp divergence in the resettlement of these population groups began. This process was associated with the increasing role of self-organization in the resettlement of Syrians and Iraqis across Sweden, who preferred to settle in large urban communes of the country.

The prevailing trend in the internal migration of the Syrians and Iraqis has been to settle in peripheral areas of Sweden's largest cities. It is these areas, marked by the government as vulnerable, characterized by high crime rates, lack of acceptance of the host society's norms and values, and the popularity of Muslim fundamentalism and radical ideas, that are now the site of spatial exclusion of the Syrian and Iraqi migrant populations.

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The authors

Maksim M. Agafoshin, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

E-mail: agafoshinmm@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0245-0481>

Stanislav A. Gorokhov, Leading Research Fellow, Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

E-mail: stgorohov@yandex.ru

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9984-6054>

Ruslan V. Dmitriev, Leading Research Fellow, Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

E-mail: dmitrievrv@yandex.ru

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4018-9832>



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