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# THE POWER OF CLOTHING

Special Feature:  
Syrian Refugees  
Living in Germany,  
Working in Berlin

18  
SUMMER

UNIQLO

LifeWear





**BEFORE**

A world heritage site in Syria



**AFTER**

left in ruins by the fighting

Aleppo, Syria's biggest city, boasts one of the world's oldest pre-Christian castles. The castle and souk market are world heritage sites but the souk was tragically reduced to ruins after civil conflict escalated in 2012.



# Syrian Refugees Living in Germany, Working in Berlin

Germany has witnessed an influx of refugees in recent years. Three refugees currently work at UNIQLO stores in Berlin. What's their life like, and what of their future?

Photographs by Dahahm Choi for The Bakery



Abdul, 25, travelled all the way to Germany to escape war-torn Syria. Abdul fled Damascus in September 2015 with a few precious possessions in a rucksack, leaving behind his parents who had decided to remain at his childhood home.

The journey from Syria to Germany was fraught with danger, freezing weather and fear. When Abdul finally reached Germany, he was granted refugee status. He started learning German, obtained a working visa and rented a place to live in the Berlin suburbs. He sent his resume to UNIQLO, attended an interview and started working at the UNIQLO TAUENTZIEN global flagship store in Berlin.

Abdul soon blended in with his colleagues and wants to be store manager one day. He has moved into the advanced German class and hopes to go to university to study business.

Before we go any further, let's look at why Germany has opened its doors to reportedly over 1.8 million refugees.

The German constitution clearly states that Germany has a fundamental obligation to shelter and protect refugees.

Over the past fifty years, Germany has amassed huge practical experience in actively welcoming migrant workers. In the late 1990s, Germany accepted many refugees from former Yugoslavia. While the refugee debate remains polarized, Germany is no stranger to the challenges of immigration and 20% of the current population is said to have some immigrant roots.

However, Germany appears determined to continue welcoming and integrating refugees over the long-term.

As the German population continues to age, many people believe welcoming refugees is a valuable investment in future German society, on the basis that countries with an efficient and enthusiastic workforce are most likely to prosper.

## Syrian refugees.

Refugee  
A to Z

As of end 2016, the number of refugees and displaced persons worldwide reached a record 65 million. Since Syria's internal conflict began in 2011, approximately 5 million refugees have fled the country and 6.3 million have sought refuge within the country's borders. Fifty percent of refugees are said to be women and children under 18 years of age. Before the conflict, near 100% of children received an elementary education. That ratio has since dropped to under 60%.







**Abdul travelled the Balkan Route.**  
 The Balkan Route from Damascus in Syria to Munich in Germany spans approximately 3,400km. Even after reaching Munich, Abdul was moved from place to place within Germany.

Abdul's rucksack contained a miniature Koran, a smartphone, and handwritten prayers from his mother.

Top: Syrian streets decimated by the conflict. People take flight (Photos ©UNHCR)

Abdul left Damascus for Germany. He traveled to the Turkish coast where he attempted to cross to Greece in an inflatable rubber dinghy. The crowded boat capsized. Abdul was saved but his rucksack was washed away and he had to return to Turkey.

side of the island, where he boarded a ship bound for the Greek city of Thessaloniki. From there the journey was over land.

Abdul's elder brother Mohammed brought another rucksack to Turkey, and the brothers decided to travel together. Abdul left Izmir in the middle of night with over 40 others in an overcrowded dinghy. On reaching the Greek island of Samos, he walked for six hours to the port on the other

After crossing Macedonia and Serbia in a rickety bus, he got off before the Hungarian border. He entered a forest and walked across the border into Hungary. A helicopter circled overhead beaming searchlights into the forest. Fearing he would be sent back if discovered by Hungarian police, Abdul hid in a corn field. After some time he started walking, wet from the pouring rain and shivering with cold and fear, listening to

the distant barks of police dogs. He was eventually rounded up by the police and put on a bus to Budapest. He was held by the authorities and slept on an ice cold floor. When he was finally released, he boarded a train to Vienna, Austria.

Abdul will never forget the people's kindness in Austria, and the taste of fresh juice and chocolate or the simple joy of brushing one's teeth. Equipped with new clothes and rucksack, Abdul travelled for five hours by train from Austria to Munich, Germany where he received an enthusiastic welcome.

**Refugee A to Z**

**The closure of the Balkan Route.**

The Balkan Route used by refugees to reach Europe from Syria via Turkey, Greece and the Balkan Peninsula was effectively closed in March 2016, six months after Abdul traveled it. The EU's decision to offer financial support for refugees in Turkey meant limiting new arrivals to enter. Many refugees have continued to attempt the crossing, fueling concern about the health and safety of growing numbers of refugees temporarily housed in Greece.





Abdul started free German classes run by non-profit SYSTEM DATA in October 2016 to help him learn the language. Now in the advanced class, Abdul also learns about German history, culture, tradition and regional characteristics.



On September 15, 2015, Abdul reached Munich and was immediately transferred to Eisenhüttenstadt near the German/Polish border. He received some clothes but slept in a cold tent. Two days later he started German conversation classes. Next he moved to Fürstenberg, a small town close to Berlin, where he stayed in a large room with three bunk beds in a beautiful building. He had a desk. The room was clean. He had hot water, a shower and toilet. Abdul was comfortable but with little to do for four months he felt bored for the first time since leaving Damascus.

Abdul attended one or two classes a week until daily lessons started in month three. By talking with the teacher and reading example sentences, Abdul learned about German culture and customs, including the need to be on time. The community center and local families invited him to social functions. He met many kind people, but some were less sympathetic to his plight.

He visited Berlin with a friend who had lived in Germany for over ten years. Berlin was a one-hour express train ride away. Taking the train to Berlin, he learned how to read the timetable. He also learned not to smoke in restaurants or stations and to wait for the green light at crosswalks.

Abdul moved next to Lehnitz, where he received an allowance to cook his own meals. Having never cooked, he swiftly called his mother and aunts for some recipes.

Abdul was introduced to a German host family who provided accommodation to him and his brother. Abdul attended German classes daily in Berlin, and his host parents also taught him. He watched German DVDs with subtitles over and over and gradually came to understand his host father. His hosts helped him find a more permanent place to live, and helped him negotiate the contract. That's how he came to be living with his brother in a small terrace house in Fürstenberg, a suburb of Berlin.

### Refugee education program.

Refugee  
A to Z

The Berliner Stadtmission provides various refugee support programs, from emergency protection to German lessons and job hunting. The Mission's three-pronged approach focuses on language learning, building friendships and integrating into German society. Strong language skills are vital for effective communication, and it is also important to mix with German citizens and build new friendships.



At UNI QLO TAUMENTZEN Maria supports refugee employees and works with NGOs on refugee employment.

When his host family in Fürstenberg asked about his job in Syria, Abdul told them he managed a maternity clothing store. He listened eagerly when their daughter talked about her job at UNI QLO in Berlin.

Abdul loved the warmth and comfortable feel of the HEATTECH innerwear she gave him as a present. He was interested in the Japanese clothing technology and bought an Ultra Light Down jacket at the Berlin store. Impressed by the thin, light fashionable feel, and the jacket's sheer warmth, Abdul decided he wanted to work at UNI QLO.

He persevered and passed the BI level examination for advanced German which enables him to carry out complicated tasks at the workplace. The host family encouraged him to submit his resume to UNI QLO. At his interview, he was struck by how kind everyone was. Nine months after arriving in Germany, he got the job.

Many refugees struggle with their new life in Germany because they can't master the language and find a job they like. Many suffer emotional trauma and can't get back on their feet, or they hate being separated from their



Abdul works on the UNI QLO TAUMENTZEN basement floor, greeting customers with a smile.

family. Abdul's story was different.

At first, he worried about explaining the products well in German. There was a moment he made a mistake. Once when he was shortening a pair of chino pants for a customer, he went and shortened another pair of pants by the same amount even though the design and fit were different.

Abdul soon noticed several other non-native German speakers and employees with disabilities working enthusiastically in the store. He also noticed how well the teams of staff on each floor worked together.

## Helping refugees find employment.

Refugee  
A to Z

The Berliner Stadtmission NGO offers guidance on national professional qualifications, writing resumes and interview technique, and helping individual refugees find a job. They try to reassure refugees by explaining that German interviewers don't tend to smile much at interviews even if they like you.





Abdul's house in Fürstenberg. The two brothers prepare a macaroni dish with chicken and vegetables.



Maria: I visited the house where Abdul and his brother live approximately 90 minutes from Berlin.

I walked along a leafy green street alongside a river and arrived at a terrace house with a back garden. I took my shoes off and went inside. The house was meticulously clean. I heard birds singing through the garden window.

The brothers needed money to put in a unit kitchen and purchase appliances and furniture. The government gave them some financial support and local families donated a lot of secondhand furniture.

I asked them about the conflict in Syria. The anti-government democratic movement in Tunisia spread through Libya and Egypt to Syria.

The brothers lived in the Damascus capital. As the government headquarters, Damascus escaped the heavy bombing and high death toll witnessed in Aleppo. At first the brothers criticized such movements because they didn't believe it was possible to achieve fundamental change in nation such as Syria.

However, when the original group of 100 demonstrators expanded, armed conflict broke out on the outskirts of Damascus. The brothers' opinion changed dramatically in the face of mounting abuse. In 2014, children

in a regional city were physically punished for writing the word "freedom" on a street wall. As the number of anti-government forces swelled, the government's action escalated from seeking to simply control the demonstrators to the use of military force.

Bombs rained down on the Damascus suburbs. Abdul's neighborhood wasn't struck directly, but regular citizens feared for their lives and many decided to flee their country.

The brothers understood the true meaning of freedom after coming to Germany. They believe they will probably never be able to go back to Syria again.

After making dinner, the brothers walked me back to the nearest station. There written in small black letters on a white-tiled wall were the words, "We welcome refugees!"

**Refugee  
A to Z**

**Future employment of refugees at UNIQLO.**

UNIQLO has only just started employing refugees in Germany, but already we are noticing an improvement in teamwork, and we feel that looking after customers is a great way to interact with residents and integrate into society. UNIQLO TAUENTZIEN is planning to hire refugee employees on each floor. UNIQLO wants to increase refugee employees not just in Japan and Germany, but across its global network.

## Three Things We Can Do as a Clothing Company

How can UNIQLO support refugees? In three ways: Delivering clothes to refugees, helping refugees gain independence and employment, and working side by side with refugees.



◀ For more details  
<http://www.uniqlo.com/en/sustainability/refugees/photo/>

### 1 Delivering Clothes..... Clothing Aid

UNIQLO started its All-Product Recycling program in 2006. In 2007, UNIQLO began delivering secondhand clothes donated by customers to refugees and displaced persons with the help of its global partner, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and other NGOs.

### 2 Helping Refugees Find Employment..... Fostering Independence

UNIQLO's training support programs in textile and embroidery techniques help refugees gain the will and confidence to work. In 2016, UNIQLO also extended US\$10 million to UNHCR over a three-year period. Of that total, \$5.5 million has been designated for self-reliance programs.



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◀ For more details  
<http://www.uniqlo.com/en/sustainability/refugees/photo/india/>

### 3 Working Side by Side..... Employing Refugees

UNIQLO seeks to employ refugees. Since starting the program in 2011, we have worked with various refugee support organizations to help promote refugee employment and provide effective ongoing support to our refugee employees. We currently hire 45 refugees (as of May 15, 2017). We want to expand that to 100 refugees.



## Their future is Our Future: Living and Working Alongside Refugees

What would you do if your home town was destroyed by conflict and you could no longer live there? You'd probably risk everything to reach a new country that offered safety and employment even if it was far away and you'd never been there. While refugees flee their home countries for a myriad of reasons, we can all imagine the anxiety and apprehension they must feel.

Even after finally reaching a safe country, challenges remain if you don't understand the language. You hear people talk, but you can't understand a word they are saying. Unable to convey your thoughts and needs, that anxiety could consume you.

It is not just the language. You could confuse people in your new host country with a simple gesture if you don't understand the local customs or culture. Simple gestures or expressions can have different nuances in different countries.

At the same time, today's global economy, society and culture are increasingly interdependent and intimately linked. We can no longer isolate or insulate ourselves from conflict or persecution occurring in faraway countries because these events adversely impact the global community. Refugees forced to flee faraway homes are no longer a distant problem that we can detach ourselves from. It is much closer to home.

What can we do, as a clothing company, to help alleviate the plight of over 65 million refugees and displaced persons worldwide? Having enlisted the cooperation of our customers, we work hand in hand with UNHCR and other organizations to promote initiatives that focus primarily on providing refugees with much-needed clothing, as well as the opportunity to build independence and secure long-term employment.

Improving the lives of refugees in difficult circumstances, providing environments where refugees can work productively, and working alongside each other. Such measures can help steer our interconnected world in a more positive direction, and contribute to its prosperity and sustainability. In a way, our future and the future of refugees are now one and the same.

We are determined to keep pushing for solutions to refugee issues.

<http://www.uniqlo.com/en/sustainability/>

See more about UNIQLO's sustainability activities

UNIQLO sustainability





