

# Syrian refugees leaving Germany over family reunification policy

Syrians granted limited asylum but denied the right to fetch relatives are departing Germany for Turkey by using smugglers, say German media. The cases, if confirmed, bizarrely reverse the “Balkan route” drama of 2015.



Thousands of Syrian refugees are attempting to leave Germany despite being legally entitled to stay, according to a report to be aired Thursday on German public broadcaster ARD.

Stuck in Germany without close relatives because of Berlin’s all but refusal to allow family reunions, the refugees were said to be using traffickers to reach their families in Turkey, saying “we’d rather die together than live apart.”

The journey, now in reverse, retraces the same risky routes they used from the outset of Syria’s six-year war, reported “Panorama,” a Hamburg-based investigative program and its offshoot channel Strg\_F.

The reports coincided Thursday with a European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling in favor of family reunions for juvenile refugees entering adulthood.

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One smuggler told reporters he was guiding 50 individuals, mostly Syrians with right of residency in Germany, from EU member Greece into Turkey across the border river Evros to be reunited with family members in a Turkish refuge.

The crossing cost about 200 euros (\$247), he said. Without visas, they were entering Turkey, with whom the EU struck a multibillion-euro refugee deal in 2016 to close sea routes leading into Balkan nations such as Serbia.

Syrians were exchanging information of “reverse escapes” on social media, said “Panorama” and Strg\_F, the German equivalent of the computer keyboard combination of Control F.

One young Syrian told of failing to get a foothold in Germany and feeling embarrassed because he had ended up living in Frankfurt’s red-light district. “Bye-bye Frankfurt,” he tells the camera team, filming a nighttime scene with him from a high-rise platform overlooking Germany’s financial hub.

### **‘Dramatic consequence’ of German policy**

The trend was the “dramatic consequence of the catastrophic error of [Germany’s] coalition government (against) family reunions, said Günter Burkhardt, director of Pro Asyl, a Frankfurt-based pro-refugee network backed by churches, unions and rights groups.

Burkhardt was referring to a limited asylum, based on a 2011 EU directive and instituted in German asylum law in 2016, called “subsidiary protection,” which offers lesser protection than awarded via the 1951 Geneva refugee convention.

Under the coalition deal binding Chancellor Angela Merkel’s new three-party government, Germany only admits 1,000 close relatives of “subsidiary protection” refugees on “humanitarian grounds” each month.

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Dominik Bartsch, the representative in Germany for the refugee agency UNHCR, was quoted by *Panorama* as saying he had heard of cases of Syrians leaving for Turkey, but he could not quantify them.

### **‘Absurd’ twist, say Greens**

The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) said it did not collate data on such departures, because foreigners with valid residency permits could travel into foreign territory beyond Europe.

The Greens' parliamentary group spokeswoman on refugee issues in Germany's Bundestag, Luise Amtsberg, described the situation as "absurd," given the EU's deal with Turkey.

The young Syrian man who failed to get a foothold in Germany and ended up in Frankfurt's red-light district was interviewed by Strg\_F.

### **'Bye-bye Frankfurt'**

The Strg-F team said Facebook entries showed that the young Syrian man it filmed, and identified as Basel, was far from being alone in departing Germany — in his case after three years residence.

"His girlfriend is in Syria. He hopes to fetch her to Turkey as fast as possible," say the documentary makers, adding that the couple's plan for Germany has imploded.

Before getting asylum in Germany, Basel's bid to reach Europe had involved three traumatic boat capsizes.

"We check the Facebook group. Basel is not the only one who's leaving Germany on this day. There are hundreds."

From Thessaloniki in Greece, Syrians such as Basel were then crossing the river Evros at night into Turkey, but without a visa, the reporter narrates.

ipj/ng (epd, dpa, AFP, KNA)

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