

MYTHS VERSUS REALITY:

Immigration from the Middle East and
Northern Africa to the Czech Republic





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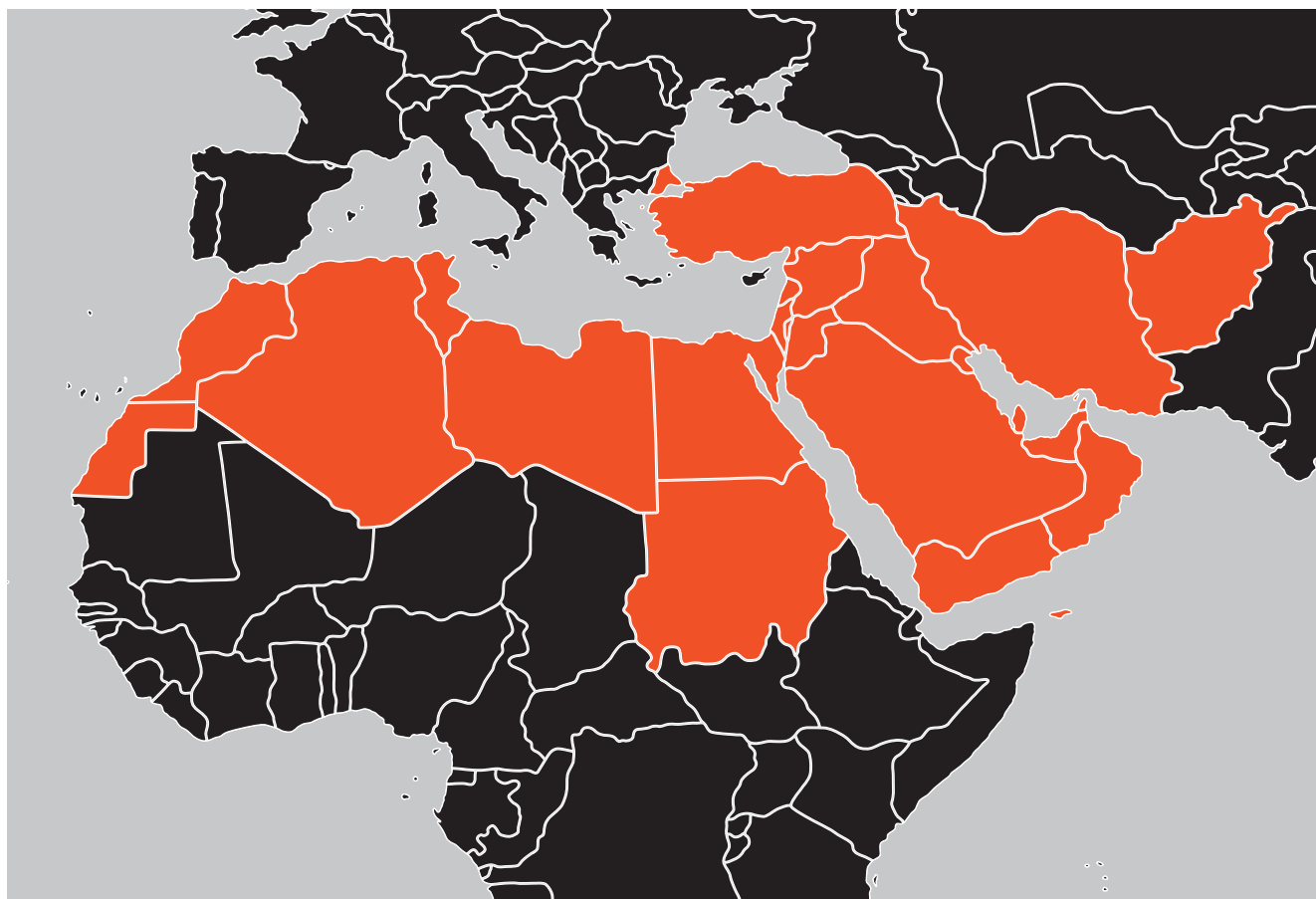
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IMMIGRATION FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTHERN AFRICA TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The following article deals with immigration from the Middle East and North Africa to the Czech Republic. It briefly summarizes the history and development of immigration throughout the 20th century in the former Czechoslovakia and focuses on the contemporary Middle Eastern immigrant communities in the Czech Republic with regard to the degree of their integration, activities and media image. The text derives information from available monographs, studies and articles on the topic published so far, as well as from official statistics. Several Czech monographs on Islam in the Czech lands deal marginally with the topic of migration from the Middle East, as it provoked excessive media coverage in the years following the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 (see below), whereas a range of studies and theses deal with particular issues relating to the migration. Since the immigration from the Middle East and North Africa to the Czech Republic has been relatively insignificant so far, academic assessment of certain larger communities currently living in the Czech Republic is still missing. The well-established communities of Syrians and Iraqis are nevertheless well described, which is why the text treats them in more detail. It also mentions the Turkish community, which has been on the rise in recent years.

The regions of interest include the Middle East (Egypt, Levant, Turkey, Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, and Iran) as well as other Arab countries in Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Libya and Sudan). In addition to these territories, often referred to as MENA (**M**iddle **E**ast and **N**orth **A**frica), the text includes data on the migration of Afghans, considering the importance of their migration for neighboring Germany and Austria in recent years.

Fig.: Countries of origin of the migrant communities under review



1. Immigration from the Middle East and North Africa to Czechoslovakia

Unlike Western and Southern European countries, Czech lands have almost no historical experience with immigration from the Middle East. Until the 1950s, this was essentially limited to diplomats, their entourage, and sporadic students. The number of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa only began to grow during the Czechoslovak socialist era, by virtue of cooperation of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic with certain Arab countries, which at the time allied more or less with the Soviet Union. During the communist era, Czechoslovakia maintained the warmest political relations and trade partnerships (especially in the fields of arms exports and military training) with the fellow Arab nationalist regimes such as the Nasser's Egypt, baassist Syria, Algeria under the rule of Ben Bella and Boumediene, Iraq under the rule of Abd Al-Karim Qasim (1958–1963), Sudan at the beginning of the reign of Jaafar Nimeiri, or with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (Zídek, Sieber 2009, p. 19). In the late 1950s, students sent by the allied national socialist parties began the flow to Czechoslovakia, mostly to study at military, medical and technical schools (Mendel, Ostřanský, Rataj 2007, p. 369).

For example, there were 200 students and 30 trainees in industry from **Iraq** in Czechoslovakia in 1962 (Zídek, Sieber 2009, p. 93), and dozens of young studying communists from **Sudan** in the 1960s (*ibid.*, p. 263), 475 students from **Syria** in 1973–1974 (mostly at their own expense) (*ibid.*, p. 285), and 469 students from **Libya** were enrolled in military schools in 1980 (*ibid.*, p. 210). Similarly, in the 1980s, there were 200 **Lebanese** living in Czechoslovakia and coming from various Arab countries, including the original **Palestinians**, whose political representatives in Lebanon and elsewhere Czechoslovakia maintained contacts with.

Many of these students stayed or returned to Czechoslovakia after their studies. They started families in here and laid the foundations of the Arab communities in the Czech Republic (see below).

2. Immigration between 1989 and 2009

After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the country's migration balance gradually reversed in favor of immigration. During the 1990s, the Czech Republic was no more just a transit country, but increasingly transformed into a country of destination, especially after 2001: between 2001 and 2008 the number of foreigners in the Czech Republic increased several times (77 thousand in 2008 compared to approximately 13 thousand in 2001; Drbohlav et al. 2010, p. 33), while the number of immigrants, asylum seekers and persons with newly acquired Czech citizenship from the Middle East increased slightly too. Along with this phenomenon, there was an increase in the number of Islam devotees, as those formed vast majority of the immigrants from the Middle East. However, the increase in Muslim immigration was mainly related to the inflow of Balkan Muslims. In the 1990s, the Czech Republic accepted, among others, thousands of Bosnian Muslims fleeing from the war in Yugoslavia (the number of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina registered in the Czech Republic in 1992–1995 was approximately 5,000; Fňukal, Šrubař 2008, p. 140).

Though rather sparse, the Czech Muslims, as well as various other churches and religious groups, took advantage of the newly established freedom after 1989 and registered as a religious community. Muslim religious and cultural organizations established in the 1990s include the Headquarters of the Muslim Religious Communities (hereinafter referred to as UMO) associating Islamic Foundations in Prague and Brno and Islamic Centers in Prague and Teplice. According to Bečka and Mendel (1998), there were about 600 engaged Muslims in the Czech Republic in 1998 – 9 out of 10 were foreigners from both Europe (Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, etc.) and

from the Near and Middle East and North Africa. The Czech Republic's census of 2001 identified approximately 3,600 citizens professing Islam, including converts of the Czech origin. However, as experts observe, a large proportion of these Muslims are not involved in the activities of the Czech Muslim communities (Mendel, Ostřanský, Rataj 2007, p. 410). Many authors¹ have drawn attention to the substantially varied level of religiosity, ethnic diversity and overall disunity amongst Muslims living in the Czech Republic since the 1990s. The largest number of local Muslims originated from the ranks of foreigners with permanent and long-term residence permits; as to Arab countries, Syrians, Iraqis and Egyptians were estimated to be the most numbering over the first decade of the 21st century (Mendel, Rataj, Ostřanský 2007, p. 409).

After the relatively chaotic migration policy of the early 1990s, the Czech Republic's approach to immigration underwent a noticeable evolution towards a more restrictive and selective model (Kušnířáková, Čížinský, 2011); after the Czech Republic's accession to the EU, the legislation got consolidated and unified with EU laws, and the government adopted measures contributing to improving the integration of foreigners. Increased immigration from the Middle East was nevertheless hampered by the Czech Republic's strict visa policy vis-à-vis the Middle East, requiring, for example, high financial deposits (Murad 2009), though in fact the conditions – such as the low birth rates, increase in GDP after 2005 and related decrease of unemployment and demand for foreign labor force – were favorable for immigration to the Czech Republic from foreign countries (Drbohlav et al. 2010, p. 153).

In terms of asylum procedures, the asylum recognition rate has always been low in the Czech Republic; in 1990–2008, asylum was granted to only 4% of the 88,000 asylum seekers (according to Drbohlav et al. 2010, p. 152). Though the Czech Republic experienced the highest number of asylum applications in 2001 (18,088, a year-on-year increase of 106% due to legislative changes allowing persons granted asylum to work legally in the Czech Republic), the applications from the nationals of the Middle Eastern countries decreased that year (Report 2001). In 2006, the government introduced so-called subsidiary protection (together with asylum jointly called “international protection”) that was granted for a definite period of time. The countries of origin of the persons seeking international protection were varied, the applicants from the Middle East did not rank high in the statistics. However, Egypt and Turkey ranked second in 2006 and 2008 respectively. The applications from Afghans and Iraqis were common though totaling lower absolute quantities throughout the period. They, along with Iranians, were nevertheless achieving the highest asylum and subsidiary protection recognition rate. As far as the above-mentioned increase in asylum applications by Egyptians and Turks between 2006 and 2008 is concerned, the Ministry of the Interior (MV CR) mostly assessed their cases as “economically motivated”, aimed at abusing of the asylum procedure in order to enter the Czech Republic and to move on to other EU countries, and dismissed them as such.²

¹ The institutional establishment of Islam in the Czech Republic is described in detail in the publication **Islám v srdci Evropy** (Islam in the Heart of Europe) by the Mendel, Rataj and Ostřanský collective of 2007, which follows up to the older publication **Islám a české země** (Islam and the Czech Lands) (Bečka, Mendel 1998), and later also the extensive publication **Muslimové v Česku: Etablování muslimů a islámu na veřejnosti** (Muslims in Czechia: Establishing Muslims and Islam in public) (Topinka et al. 2016).

² 2001–2010 Migration Situation Reports by the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. Available at: <https://www.mvcr.cz/migrace/clanek/rocní-zpravy-o-situaci-v-oblasti-migrace-a-integrace-cizincu-v-ceske-republice-za-roky-2001-2018.aspx>.

The Afghans, Iraqis and Turks ranked among the top 15 nationalities of irregular migrants in the statistics. In general, they were detained in their attempts to cross the border illegally heading to Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom or the Nordic countries (Reports of 2001, 2002, 2003 etc.).

For a long time, practically no public and media attention aimed at immigrants from the Middle East. They were only mentioned in connection with spa tourism and in the police and refugee context (Topinka et al. 2016, p. 24). In the second half of the 1990s, part of the public disagreed with the planned establishment of the first two Czech mosques in Brno and Prague, and with the application by UMO for acknowledgment of authorization to exercise special rights³ filed in 2006 (similar protests occurred once again in 2014 when UMO could newly file the application – which nevertheless was not allowed either).⁴ After 2001, the media showed increased interest in Islam and Muslims in the Czech Republic due to the terrorist attacks in the USA and Europe. The Czech intelligence service started to concentrate more intensively on the Islamic extremism too (see below). On the one hand, the anti-Islamic discourse began to form, and on the other hand, Muslim organizations began to express themselves more in public.

3. Immigration after 2010

Compared to previous decades, there has been an increase in migration from the region under review since 2010. These foreigners have been legally employed in the Czech Republic (in 2011, the groups amounting at over one hundred individuals included: Tunisians, Turks, Israelis, Egyptians and Algerians), or have run businesses here (mostly Algerians, Syrians, Turks). The number of Turkish and Arabic students (from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, etc.) has increased too. In 2011, asylum dominantly sought the Afghans (a total of 219 valid asylum statuses in the Czech Republic) and the Iraqis (114 valid asylum statuses). Both of these foreign nationals were also often detained in illegal transit migration: in 2011 it was 36 Afghans who were transiting the Czech Republic hidden in trucks heading for other Schengen Area countries.

Although not all migrants from the Middle East are Muslims (countries like Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, or Iraq have smaller or larger Christian communities), most of them profess Islam. Topinka (2016) presents statistics from the 2011 **Population and Housing Census**, in which 3,358 people claimed to profess Islam, with the vast majority of them having the Czech citizenship. Amongst the foreigners (staying in the Czech Republic for over 1 year, or intending to apply for long-term residence) from the region under review, the majority of the religious Muslims were Turkish (143), Egyptian (108), Tunisian (105) and Algerian (81) nationals. Muslims with dual citizenship were holding in addition to the Czech citizenship mostly the citizenship of Egypt, Algeria and Syria. The census also showed that over a half of all the declared Muslims were university graduates or had a diploma of advanced secondary education (82.2% altogether), were economically active (59.6%) and that men prevailed (69.5%) in the group (Topinka et al. 2016, p. 45).

³ Pursuant to Section 7 (1) of Act No. 3/2002 Coll., these special rights include the right to teach religion in public schools, the right of church marriages, the right to establish church schools, etc.

⁴ For more details see Mendel, Ostřanský, Rataj 2007; and Topinka et al. 2016.



Mariwan Majid, Kurdish heart surgeon. Photograph: Tomáš Krist

The years 2010–2015 brought escalation of the anti-Islamic discourse in the media and, at the same time, the topic of immigration from Muslim countries was significantly politicized (Čermáková, Janků, Linhartová 2016, p. 25). Initially, the topic appeared in political programs just marginally (e.g. in the program of Úsvit přímé demokracie (Dawn of Direct Democracy) party of 2013), but after the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, it became an important political issue of the Czech parties across the spectrum. More than 1.1 million migrants predominantly from the Middle East arrived in the EU by the end of that year (2015 Report), and though the Czech Republic was not their destination country, the existing studies have revealed that media reported this immigration wave as closely related to domestic affairs (Sedláková, Lapčík, Burešová 2015, p. 84). The media generally perceive local Muslims through the prism of foreign events (Islamic State, terrorist attacks, migration crisis, etc.). They have become the target of criticism and sporadic attacks (Čermáková, Janků, Linhartová 2016, p. 35).

In 2015, when the so-called refugee crisis was taking place, 1525 persons sought international protection according to the statistics of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (MV CR), which accounted for a year-on-year increase of 31.9%. However, this number was several times lower compared to the asylum applications filed in 1999–2003. The home countries of applicants in 2015 were mainly Ukraine (694), Syria (134), Cuba (128) and Vietnam (81). Most often, asylum was granted to Syrian nationals (in 29 cases), while Iraqis were granted asylum in four cases. Besides Ukrainians, subsidiary protection was mostly granted to Syrians (101 persons), and was extended to 68 Syrians and 36 Iraqis that year (2015 Report).

In terms of the irregular migration, the year 2015 brought significant changes too: Syrian nationals replaced Ukrainians at the top of the list; 2 016 were detained during illegal transit (thus accounting for 24.7% of the total number of third-country nationals). Illegal residence was also detected in 591 Kuwaitis due to their exceeding of the allowed period of the therapeutic stays in the Czech spas (commonly occurring among nationals of Saudi Arabia and Libya too). According to the MV CR statistics (2015 Report), in terms of the illegal transit migration the Syrians (2,016 people) were followed by Kuwaitis (591), Afghanis (585) and Iraqis (404). The latter three were also the three most common nationalities occurring within the migration wave to Europe in 2015.

4. Current Immigration

Currently, the citizens of **Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Tunisia** and **Syria** are the most frequent long-term residents in the Czech Republic. Most persons granted asylums are Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans. The statistics in the table below show that around 6,900 citizens of Arab countries were legally resident in the Czech Republic in 2018, and about 7,770 persons in 2019 according to preliminary data. However, the number of permanent residents is considerably smaller – if considering only the permanent residence, none of the nationalities listed below ranks among the 25 most numerous in the Czech Republic. The statistics naturally do not take into account irregular migrants or family members of immigrants permanently living in the country with granted Czech citizenship. According to the reports of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (MV CR), tens of citizens of the Middle Eastern countries acquire Czech citizenship annually.

Foreigners from the Near East and North Africa in the Czech Republic in 2018 according to the Czech Statistical Office (CSU) and preliminary data as of 30 September 2019; source: Directorate of Foreign Police

Country	Total number of citizens as of 31. 12. 2018	Of that staying for over 12 months	Percentage of women	Asylum granted	Preliminary data as of 30. 9. 2019 (in total)	Of that permanent residence
Turkey	3,109	2,109	30.11	4	2,769	875
Israel	1,162	1,069	39.16	–	1,120	556
Egypt	1,151	1,064	17.20	4	1,133	549
Tunisia	1,087	1,059	11.68	–	1,069	713
Syria	1,348	851	37.31	442	1,292	616
Algeria	759	749	18.71	–	762	614
Afghanistan	402	362	32.84	86	389	242
Iran	763	577	48.23	16	690	154
Iraq	552	324	34.78	207	530	341
Morocco	382	344	22.77	4	384	230
Lebanon	356	310	27.53	6	329	226
Jordan	287	238	23.34	1	290	166
Libya	227	214	33.92	10	232	141
Yemen	226	180	42.92	15	214	128
Palestine	196	180	31.63	1	175	105
Saudi Arabia	167	133	23.95	1	130	27
Sudan	70	55	28.57	9	65	45
Oman	34	11	0.00	–	35	–
Kuwait	25	25	16.00	–	23	10
Bahrain	18	15	38.89	–	16	5
United Arab Emirates	9	5	33.33	–	4	3
Mauritania	4	3	–	–	3	2
Qatar	–	–	–	–	–	–



The number of **seekers for international protection** was low from the region under review in 2019 (as at 30 September), with the majority being Iranians (35 persons) (2019 Quarterly Migration Report). The three most common groups of asylum seekers in Europe, i.e. Afghans, Syrians and Iraqis, accounted for only 7.5% of the total number of applicants for international protection in the Czech Republic in the first half of the year.⁵ Illegal migration also did not comprise any large percentage of people from the Middle East and North Africa. Once again, it largely consisted of **the illegal transit migration** of the nationals of Afghanistan (60), Iraq (35), Syria (28), Iran (16) and Yemen (11). The majority thereof were travelling to Germany (130) and France (17) (2019 Quarterly Migration Report). In general, the number of refugees fleeing from Africa and the Middle East via Mediterranean routes to the European Union has been decreasing in recent years; in the beginning of 2019 it dropped to around a tenth of the record one million occurred in 2015.⁶

Arab, Turkish and Persian migrants are concentrated in vicinity of large cities in the Czech Republic, mostly in the capital city of **Prague**. They do not form large communities, are part of minor networks and the places of their residence are scattered (Topinka et al. 2016, p. 54). For this reason, there have been no ghettos formed in the Czech Republic (Topinka et al. 2007; Heřmanová, Faryadová 2012; Janků, Topinka 2018).

As for Arab nationalities, statistics show that Syrians for instance predominate in **Brno** – at the end of March 2017 there were 180 thereof residing in Brno-city; they are followed by Egyptians (178), Tunisians (130) and Iraqis (118); several dozens of migrants occurred also amongst the nationals of Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Libya (MV CR, according to Janků, Topinka 2018). The Arab community in Teplice constitutes a specific case – according to the study by Kostková, Kramářeková and Jiráčková (2017), there are permanently settled Arabs from Yemen, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Tunisia. Those residing in Teplice for the longest time came to the country within the scope of various scholarship programs of mainly medical schools and afterwards began working in Teplice spa facilities, providing services both to the clients from Arab countries and the Czech Republic in there. Thousands of citizens of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other countries come to Teplice every year for therapeutic stays (frequently longer than 90 days). While the first mentioned group of the Arabs residing permanently in the city coexists seamlessly within the majority society, the visitors from the states of the Gulf have repeatedly evoked resentment and protests of the locals, contributing to the current decline in the spa Arab clientele.⁷

⁵ iRozhlas (7 May 2019): „Devět z deseti žádostí zamítnuto. Proč Česko uplatňuje nejtvrďší azylovou politiku ze států Evropské unie?“ (“Nine out of ten applications rejected. Why does the Czech Republic apply the toughest asylum policy in the European Union?”) Available at: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/azyl-uspesnost_1905070600_pek.

⁶ Lidovénoviny (6 March 2019): „Počet migrantů, kteří utíkají do EU z Afriky a Blízkého východu, se snížil na desetinu oproti roku 2015“. (“The number of migrants fleeing to the EU from Africa and the Middle East has decreased by one tenth compared to 2015”). Available at: https://www.lidovky.cz/svet/pocet-migrantu-keri-utikaji-do-eu-z-afriky-a-blizkeho-vychodu-se-snizil-na-desetinu-oproti-roku-2015_190306_141425_ln_zahranici_ele.

⁷ iDnes (22 May 2017): „Zájem Arabů o Teplice klesá. Vyhnaly je protest i nižší dotace na lázně“ (“Arabs’ interest in Teplice decreases. They leave due to protests and lower spa subsidies”). Available at: https://www.idnes.cz/usti/zpravy/odliv-arabu-z-lazni-teplice-podnikatele-trpi.A170520_2327100_usti-zpravy_vac2.

Currently there are a number of mosques in the Czech towns. Besides their role of the houses of prayer, they also play a social and cultural role in Muslim communities and thus serve as community centers. So far, there are two Muslim community centers (in Prague and Brno), while the other Islamic centers may be found in Hradec Králové, Karlovy Vary, Teplice and Liberec. Smaller houses of prayer are scattered all about the country. Besides other things, the Muslim communities carry out charitable and educational activities in there (Mikolín, Nohlová 2016, pp. 54–55).

The activities of Muslim communities have raised concerns about spread of religious extremism, foreign propaganda and threat of terrorism. However, the annual reports of the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) show that the potential of Islamic radicalization in the Czech Republic is limited (2018 Annual Report). In 2014, “BIS examined several foreigners who were active to a varying degree in the Czech Republic and who were reasonably suspected to have gone to Syria to take part in the fighting. Besides the presence and influence of these persons, BIS also focused attention on sympathizers of IS or other ideologically similar terrorist organizations. In this respect, the most risky group consisted of certain controversial converts and native Muslims, mostly of the younger generation. However, the prevailing opinion amongst the members of the Czech Muslim community in 2014 was that condemning the activities of Islamic State.” (2014 Annual Report, according to Linhartová 2016). Monitoring of foreign fighters from the Czech Republic in Syria and Iraq keeps going on (2018 Annual Report).

In April 2014, during the Friday prayer, the troops of the Organized Crime Detection Unit (UOOZ) intervened in the Prague-Černý most Mosque and in the Mosque in the Wenceslas Square in order to detain persons involved in the translation and distribution of the highly controversial book **Základy tauhídu: islámský koncept Boha** (Introduction to Tawhid: Islamic Concept of God) by the British Salafi Bilal Philips, published by the Prague Muslim Community in 2012. The responsible editor of the book, Vladimír Sářka, who was then the chairman of the Islamic Foundation in Prague, was accused of supporting and promoting a movement aimed at suppressing human rights and freedoms (in detail Čermáková, Janků, Linhartová, 2016). The Muslims present, including several diplomats, later raised a complaint against inadequacy and timing of the intervention. Sářka was acquitted of all the aforementioned charges in 2018.⁸ The Police of the Czech Republic and BIS have been investigating radicalization in the case of an imam of the Palestinian origin Samer Shehadeh, who was “extradited to the Czech Republic on the basis of an international arrest warrant for terrorist charges, since he had used his radical views to influence his brother and his Muslim wife and had assisted them in organizing their departure to Syria and joining a Syrian offshoot of Al Qaeda.” (2018 Annual Report). He has remained in custody to this day.

On the other hand, the Security Policy Department of the MV CR has recorded crimes with an anti-Islamic background and a whole series of xenophobic offences (Linhartová 2016, p. 180). The BIS Annual Reports of 2014, 2015 and 2016 pointed out that Islamophobic tendencies could turn into an argument for the Muslims’ radicalization, as they are hampering integration into the Czech society.

⁸ iRozhlas (11 May 2018): „Soud definitivně osvobodil Vladimíra Sářku, který šířil radikální islámskou knihu” (“The court finally acquitted Vladimír Sářka, who had been distributing radical Islamic book”). Available at: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/vladimir-sanka-sireni-radikalni-islamske-knihy-soud_1805111108_jak.



Police and intelligence service also pursue organized crime in the Czech Republic, including within the communities from the Middle East. In this context, they record activities of smaller groups in the fields of commerce and hospitality, currency exchange and illegal transport of persons involved in the forgery of administrative documents (2010 Report). To a lesser extent, marriages of convenience with citizens of the Czech Republic are dealt with amongst persons from North Africa and Turkey (2018 BIS Annual Report).

A number of sociological studies carried out over the last 15 years examined the degree of integration of Arab-Muslim communities and their relations with the Czech majority society. In 2007, the Ministry of the Interior ordered a survey *Integrační proces muslimů v České republice* (The Integration Process of Muslims in the Czech Republic) (Topinka et al. 2007). The survey conclusions stressed out the high degree of integration and described the community's relations with the society as smooth. These findings were confirmed by later studies too (Heřmanová, Faryadová 2012), including those conducted at local level (Kostková, Kramářeková and Jiráčková 2017; Janků, Topinka 2018). On the other hand, all the studies repeatedly drew attention to the lower degree of integration amongst women who rather remain in their households (Topinka et al. 2007; Vopelková 2012; Koropecová 2013; Schebelle, Kubát 2017) and highlighted the need for greater availability of Czech language courses and for development of a "tailored-made" socio-cultural course for Arab women (Schebelle, Kubát 2017, p. 22).

The Czech Republic's integration policy is formulated in the Concept of Integration of Foreign Nationals drafted by the Ministry of the Interior. Its priorities are defined in the Procedure for Implementation of the Updated Concept of Integration of Foreign Nationals (2019 Procedure). In June 2019, the Chamber of Deputies also approved the government's draft amendment to the Act on the Residency of Foreign Nationals, which stipulates, inter alia, that all newcomers from so-called third countries will be henceforth obliged to complete an adaptation-integration course within one year upon their arrival (up to then facultative) (2019 Quarterly Migration Report). This is a one-day training course acquainting briefly the attendants with their rights and duties, customs and basic values of the Czech society, and interpreted into 8 languages including Arabic.⁹

⁹ Project For more information about the courses see e.g. project „Vítejte v ČR“ (“Welcome to the Czech Republic”), Slovo 21, z. s.: <http://www.slovo21.cz/projekty-cizinci/integracni-kurzy-pro-imigranty>.

Syrian Community

The most established and the best mapped immigrant community from the Middle East is undoubtedly the Syrian community, whose foundations were formed in Czechoslovakia in the sixties (see above). In 2019, Syrians were one of the nationalities arriving the most frequently to the European Union (2019 Quarterly Report). In the Czech Republic, Syrians have been granted the highest number of asylums amongst the nationals from the region under review, with 938 applications for international protection filed in 1998–2017 (CSU 2018).

Based on the studies conducted in the community so far, we can generally say that most Syrian nationals (including the newcomers) are well-educated representatives of the middle class, often run businesses, work in sectors such as IT and medicine, and have seamless relationships with the majority society (Charvát 2008; Berg 2015). In relation to the ongoing civil war in Syria, researchers also have examined political attitudes and activities of the Syrian diaspora in the Czech Republic and have noted its fragmentation (Mareš, Murad 2013). In her thesis based on interviews, Klára Berg formulated an estimate that the modest majority of Syrian permanent residents of the Czech Republic held rather anti-regime attitude (a part thereof were nevertheless declaratively apolitical), and that the pro-regime and opposition-profiled individuals did not maintain contacts (Berg 2015, p. 39).

The community is socially and politically engaged in the Czech Republic. The strongly opposition-oriented Free Syria Initiative and the Free Syrian Community in the Czech Republic organized various political demonstrations, humanitarian collections and social events in the past (Berg 2015). The apolitical Syreczech community founded in Brno goes in for community and social activities. On the other hand, there are also pro-regime organizations present in the Czech Republic, such as the National Union of Syrian Students in the Czech Republic with the Syrian Embassy or the Czech branch of the European Solidarity Front for Syria (ESFS) (Berg 2015). A significant part of the Czech Kurdish community also comes from Syria (Mareš, Murad 2013 and 2015). In recent years, and especially since the Turkish military invasion of northern Syria (the region of Rojava), the Kurdish Civic Association has co-organized demonstrations of solidarity with Rojava in the Czech Republic.¹⁰

Iraqi Community

The Iraqi community is one of the best documented immigrant communities in the Czech Republic amongst those under review, and is the most culturally and socially engaged. The arrival of the Iraqis to the Czech Republic dates back to the 1960s in connection with the aforementioned study stays. According to the Czech-Arab Society Bulletin, the immigrants from Iraq were the second largest group amongst the Arab students. After the overthrow of the Qasim's dictatorship in the February 1963 coup, persecuted communists from Iraq (Arabs and Kurds) fled to Czechoslovakia. Establishment of a branch of the Committee for the Defense of the Iraqi People's Rights exile organization, chaired by the poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, who was granted political asylum (Gombárová 2019, p. 18) here, was permitted in Czechoslovakia. The current UMO chairman in office, Muneeb Hassan Alrawi, is of the Iraqi descent too.

¹⁰ The Association's facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Kurdsk%C3%A9-ob%C4%8Dansk%C3%A9-sdru%C5%BEen%C3%AD-v-%C4%8CR-111907726886914/>.

In respect with the current events in Iraq, both the media and academia have been focusing on the Iraqi community in terms of the potential security issues. The 2009 Michael Murad study pursues potential risks associated with the threat of terrorism, religious extremism and crime. Based on the data analysis and expert investigation, Murad concludes that “Iraqis residing in the Czech Republic do not pose a serious security threat to the national security of the Czech Republic” (Murad 2009, p.19).¹¹ Murad also notes that the Iraqis who studied in Czechoslovakia are **well integrated into the majority society**; some of them have Czech citizenship, speak Czech well and, thanks to their education, generally have higher social status. The Iraqi community includes engineers, architects, entrepreneurs, doctors, journalists, artists, etc.

In October 2018, an exhibition “The Iraqi Community in the Czech Republic – Exhibition of Photographs and Memories” was on display at the House of National Minorities in Prague. It was organized by the Czech-Arab Society in cooperation with Babylon agency and the Iraqi Forum, which brings together the Czech Iraqis (see the 2018 Czech-Arab Society Bulletin).

The Iraqi community in the Czech Republic grew after July 2015, when the Czech Republic joined the EU Resettlement Scheme and undertook to relocate 400 people from July 2015 through to July 2017. The Czech Government approved (by the Government Resolution No. 1052 of 14 Dec 2015) relocation of 153 Iraqi Christians to the Czech Republic, thus at the request of the Generace 21 Endowment Fund, a private project funded from donations by individuals and various Christian and humanitarian organizations.¹² In the spring 2016, 89 Iraqi Christians, of whom 32 were from Lebanon, were relocated under the European Resettlement Scheme and 57 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Iraqi Kurdistan were relocated under the National Resettlement Scheme. They were all granted international protection and initiated the state integration program. However, the project ended in a partial failure, as 25 displaced Iraqis fled to Germany less than two months after receiving asylum in the Czech Republic. Others decided to return to Iraq.¹³ The Government stopped supporting this program prematurely by Decree No. 307 of 7 April 2016 (2016 Report). Several Christian refugees from Iraq nevertheless remained in the Czech Republic and about 30 of them go on living here, mostly in Prague.¹⁴

A total of 342 nationals of the Republic of Iraq lived in the Czech Republic in 2017. In 2018, there were 552 staying and 324 long-term residing Iraqis here. The total of 138 **asylums** was granted to Iraqis in 1990–2008. By the end of 2018, 50 Iraqis received asylum status in the Czech Republic, while 122 Iraqis were granted **subsidiary protection** in 2018 (MV CR 2018 Summary Report).

¹¹ The threat of a terrorist attack in Prague was discussed mainly before 2003 due to the presence of the Radio Free Iraq within the Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE / RL) broadcasting. The broadcasting of the Radio Free Iraq from Prague was terminated in 2015.

¹² 2015 and 2016 Annual Reports of Generace 21 Endowment Fund. Available at: <http://www.gen21.cz/vyrocní-zpráva-2015-a-2016/>.

¹³ iRozhlas (20 April 2016): „Při výběru uprchlíků jsme neudělali zásadní chybu, říká ředitel NF Generace 21“ (“We didn't make a major mistake in the selection of refugees, says Generace 21 Director”). Available at: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/pri-vyberu-uprchliku-jsme-neudelali-zasadni-chybu-rika-reditel-nf-generace-21_201604201213_akottova2.

¹⁴ Hospodářské noviny (30 August 2018): „Uprchlíkům z Iráku se po dvou letech v Česku daří...“ (“Refugees from Iraq are doing well after two years in the Czech Republic ...”). Available at: <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66229320-iracti-krestane-nasli-v-cesku-novy-domov>.

Turkish Community

Unlike the established Syrian and Iraqi communities, other communities, and especially those of recent comers, have been investigated poorly by academia. This is also true for the Turkish immigration, which has been growing in the Czech Republic, in particular for the last two decades. Amongst the incoming Turkish nationals there are qualified employees, businessmen and entrepreneurs. Recently, the media reported about the actions taken by Czech universities aimed at providing employment to the Turkish academics dismissed after the failed coup of July 2016 against the Turkish President Erdoğan.¹⁵ At the time of the 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum, it turned out that the majority of Turks (87%) living in the Czech Republic do not support President Erdoğan, as distinct from their compatriots residing in Germany, Austria, etc.¹⁶

As far as social life is concerned, the Turks are visible thanks to the activities of ČeskoTurecko.cz or to the intercultural debates organized by Mozaiky Platform Dialog nonprofit initiative, professing the ideas of the Islamic thinker Fethullah Gülen.¹⁷ Amongst predominantly Turkish (or more precisely Turkic) houses of prayer belong those in Pivovarnická Street, Prague (the so-called Turkish mosque) or in Hradec Králové. According to certain estimates (Mareš, Murad 2015, p. 87), the nationals of Turkey have also prevailed in the local Kurdish community in recent years.



¹⁵ Deník Referendum (6 March 2017): „Olomoucká univerzita jako první zaměstnala turecké akademiky“ (“The University of Olomouc was the first to employ Turkish academics”). Available at: <http://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/24781-olomoucka-univerzita-jako-prvni-zamestnala-turecke-akademiky>.

¹⁶ Deník (12 July 2017): „Pražští Turci říkají ‚novému sultánovi‘ ne“ (“Prague Turks say no to the ‘new sultan’”). Available at: <https://www.denik.cz/regiony/prazsti-turci-rikaji-novemu-sultanovi-ne-20170712.html>.

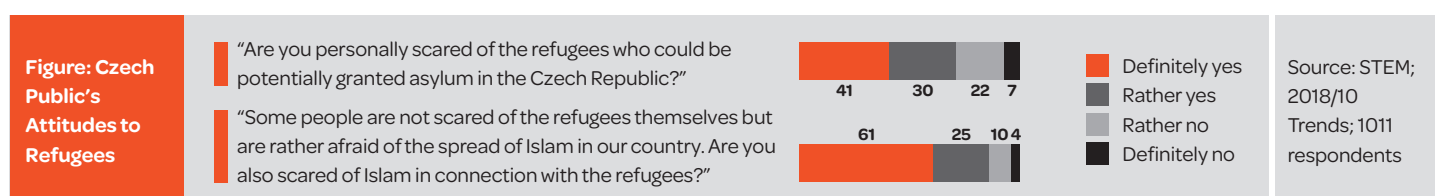
¹⁷ See the websites: <https://www.ceskoturecko.cz/> and <http://www.platformdialog.cz>.



REFLECTION OF THE MIGRATION FROM THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE CZECH MEDIA AND POLITICS

The report of a research performed by Člověk v tísni (People in Need) nonprofit organization published in 2019 provides an analysis of the migration coverage in the Czech mainstream media (Mladá fronta Dnes, Lidové noviny, Právo, iDnes, Novinky.cz and Aktuálně.cz). The period monitored comprised the two months prior to the municipal and senatorial elections held on 5 and 6 October 2018. The analysis shows that the issue of migration was the most frequently covered by the sections designated for the news from abroad, predominantly concerned migrants from **Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Eritrea**, and moreover mainly **concentrated on criminal activities**. So, three years after the so-called migration crisis, the media did not free themselves of the “crisis” perspective and the focus kept aiming at the same marginal groups leaving practically unnoticed the real immigrant communities in the Czech Republic. According to the authors, the news under review were **depersonalized and politicized**, did not reflect the everyday life and problems of migrants living in our country, and their number increased with the approaching elections. In the majority of cases politicians were expressing their views of the topic in media, while the migration experts were represented significantly less and the migrants themselves got practically no word in (Pospěch, Jurečková 2019).

It is therefore no surprise that the Czech public mostly holds negative attitude towards immigrants and reflects insufficiently on the media coverage. This is especially true for immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. Opinion polls have long shown that Czechs perceive these immigrant groups (Muslims), as unwelcome and have little personal experience therewith (Linhartová 2016, p. 182). In 2016, up to 85% of the Czech respondents in a STEM survey stated that they would tolerate poorly an Arab neighbor (STEM 2016). The new survey of October 2018 showed that the attitudes of the Czech public had not changed. Most Czechs were still afraid of refugees potentially settling in the Czech Republic, and up to 86% of respondents were concerned about the spread of Islam in connection with the influx of migrants (STEM 2018).



The issue of migration is also one of the main topics of the Czech political parties' programs (for their analysis before and after the migration crisis see e.g. Krotký 2019). In the light of the foregoing, it is certainly not surprising that the Czech government's attitude towards accepting of refugees from the Middle East is negative. The debate on the reception of a limited number of Syrian orphans from Greek refugee camps has recently become particularly visible in the media. The Czech MEP Šojdrová proposed in the autumn of 2018 already that our country accepted several children staying without guardians in the Greek refugee camps, but the initiative encountered lack of political will. In September 2019, Greece sent a letter to the Czech Ministry of the Interior, in which the Greek Minister of Citizens' Protection Michalis Chrysochoidis asked for help in relocation of 40 orphans, but the Minister of the Interior, Jan Hamáček, did not comply with the request of Greece either.¹⁸ In the long term, the Czech Government has been favoring support of the refugee assistance programs in the region of concern.¹⁹

¹⁸ Deník N (6 November 2019): „Pomozte nám se sirotky, čekáme na odpověď, psalo Řecko Hamáčkovi. Na takové dopisy se neodepisuje, tvrdí vnitro“. („Help us with the orphans, we are waiting for your answer, wrote Greece to Hamáček. The letters like this do not require an answer, claims the Ministry of the Interior“). Available at: <https://denikn.cz/229209/pomozte-nam-se-sirotky-cekame-na-odpoved-psalo-recko-hamackovi-na-takove-dopise-se-neodepisuje-tvrdi-vnitro/?ref=in>.

¹⁹ For more about the programs see: <https://www.mvcr.cz/migrace/clanek/ctvrtletni-zpravy-o-situaci-v-oblasti-migrace.aspx>.

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