

## Case Studies – Resettlement of Syrian Refugees to the United States

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**The conflict in Syria** has created the largest refugee crisis of our era. In March 2015, as the conflict entered its fifth year, over 10.3 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes, 3.9 million of whom have fled to neighboring countries. There are currently more than 1.7 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the country that now holds the world's highest number of refugees per capita, 1.6 million in Turkey, and 622,000 in Jordan. The number of Syrian refugees in host countries has stretched local resources to the breaking point. Additional refugees have fled to Northern Africa, and many continue to risk the dangerous journey to Europe out of a desperate search for safety. Resettlement to a third country is the only durable solution for many extremely vulnerable Syrian refugees.

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) sought 30,000 resettlement and humanitarian admissions spots for Syrian refugees in 2014, and an additional 100,000 slots for 2015-2016. If the U.S. is to continue its proud tradition of being the largest resettlement country in the world and resettling at least 50% of any given resettled refugee population, the U.S. should resettle 65,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016. 11,000 Syrian refugees have been referred to the U.S., but by the end of March, only 511 have been resettled since the start of the conflict.

**These recently arrived refugee families, having often waited for resettlement to the U.S. for several years, are already demonstrating their ability to succeed in their new homes, bolstered by the welcome and support they receive from local communities that are stepping up to help them start their new lives. Here are some examples:**

### Indiana

Mr. F., his wife, and their four children arrived in Indianapolis in November 2014 with only what they could carry, a little bit of hope, and a lot of courage. Mr. F. loved life in his native Syria and the water purification company he owned was flourishing. He and his family were enjoying their life, and then it all ended. As bombings started in their city, they were forced to flee to Jordan where Mr. F. was not permitted to work and therefore could not provide adequately for his family. Mr. F. and his family registered with the UNHCR and were granted refugee status. After many interviews and months of waiting, they were on their way to Indianapolis, grieving the end of the life they once knew and anxiously eager for a new beginning. Although Mr. F. misses Syria like someone would "miss their soul", he and his family are settling into their new life. Mr. F. has a job and his kids are enjoying school. He said he appreciates the way that people in the U.S. have welcomed him. Mr. F. has pledged to be the official face of welcome for new Syrian families—he wants to offer the same kind of comfort he received from the resettlement agency staff and volunteers when he arrived. The family has also had an outpouring of support from the local Syrian community with many families volunteering time and money. A local mosque connected to many local Syrians gave the family a car with the understanding that they would assist the Syrian families that follow with transportation. A local interfaith organization has also organized a Syrian Refugee Initiative, and is planning activities to support and welcome newcomers.

### Massachusetts

In February 2015, a family consisting of paternal grandparents, parents, and four children arrived in Worcester, MA from Cairo, Egypt to be reunited with the maternal grandparents who arrived a month earlier. The children were amazed to touch the snow. They had all fled their destroyed homes in Northern Syria in mid-2012, first to Damascus and then, after the fighting escalated, to Cairo and received UNHCR protective status. Both maternal and paternal grandfathers have significant medical issues and were unable to remain in Egypt. The processing of their resettlement case took 6 months. Worcester has a growing Middle-Eastern population and an

existing Syrian community, with Mediterranean markets walking distance from the family's home. Long term Syrian residents, including medical and other professionals, have been a very strong community resource, orienting newly arrived families to the neighborhood and new customs.

## Texas

A young couple and their three children arrived to Houston, TX in January 2015 from Egypt one year after they applied for resettlement. The father had been detained in Syria prior to fleeing to Egypt and was tortured through beatings and electrocution. One of his kidneys was removed, and he lost several teeth. His young son was also beaten. This traumatized father worries about his mother who remains in Syria. He says he is so thankful to be chosen for the resettlement program and to be in the U.S. where his children will be safe, unlike in Syria and Egypt where they had suffered. About being secure he says, "This is my happiness." The family is expecting a new child and, in addition to support from their local resettlement agency, is linked to members of the local Syrian association who provide additional community support.

## Virginia

A family of six, with children ranging in age from three to sixteen, was resettled in Virginia a few years after fleeing Syria to Lebanon. As a journalist, the father and his family were no longer safe in Syria, and due to the presence of Hezbollah, a Syrian regime ally, the family was not safe in Lebanon either. The family looked to come to the U.S. rather than a different resettlement country because the father's sister and her family live in Virginia. After fleeing Syria, the family spent two and a half years in Lebanon, one and a half of which were filled with the resettlement process which included ten interviews. Upon arrival, the family was surrounded by the resettlement agency staff and others in its network offering support. The Syrian American community, and soon after other members of the community, helped the family in additional ways, including with learning English.

## **Additional Stories**

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### Indiana – Unable to return to Syria and awaiting asylum

Mr. A. and his family continue to wait for their asylum claim to be heard after arriving from Syria and applying nearly three years ago. The family had visited the U.S. several times, but in July 2012 while only intending to stay for a few months, Mr. A., his wife, and their twin boys, remained in the U.S. because they could not safely return to Syria. The conflict had escalated with assassinations on the rise and a fear of chemical weapons. Not wanting to overstay their visa and with Temporary Protective Status not yet offered, Mr. A. and his family applied for asylum. Nearly three years later, they are still waiting for their case to be heard. Mr. A. owned a travel agency in Syria and combined with his wife's income, the family had a comfortable and well-established life, much different from the life in limbo they experience now. With the help of their host community in Indiana, Mr. A. and his family are working to establish their lives here despite not knowing when or what the outcome of their asylum claim will be. As they await their hearing, the family is very involved in their community. Mr. A's wife is President of the Parent-Teacher Association at the boys' school and Mr. A. serves as a delegate for the UN Refugee Agency's Refugee Congress in the U.S. Mr. A. says that "the welcoming atmosphere of the city is amazing" and is happy to have received support from the boys' school, the Rotary Club, and Syrian Americans in the community.

### Ohio – Unable to return to Syria and now welcoming refugees

Ms. C., a Syrian-American who once was a Toledo community leader in services to the homeless, now welcomes Syrian refugees and assists them with their integration. Her parents' families were both in the U.S. before she was born and her father, a U.S. citizen, served as an air force pilot in WWII. After the war, he returned to Syria where he got married and where Ms. C. and her siblings were born as American citizens. Ms. C., who studied social work and health and human services in college, became a leader in her community working with the homeless

after graduation. She returned to Syria to attend to family business, staying for ten years. When she returned to the U.S. in 2010 to visit her family, her friends and family members in Syria encouraged her not return to Syria, where the uprising had just started. After again working with the homeless in Toledo, Ms. C. began working with a refugee resettlement agency. In April 2015 the first Syrian refugee family arrived in Toledo. Ms. C. says she feels that with her language and bicultural background “god put me in the right place for the right reason” to help Syrian refugees adjust to life in the U.S. Ms. C. is finding growing support from the local Syrian America community, including doctors, engineers, and even restaurant owners interested in hiring refugees and providing them with hot meals upon arrival.

### **Michigan – Established Syrian American doctor advocates for and welcomes refugees**

Dr. B., an established Syrian-American doctor and community leader in Michigan, arrived from Syria in 1972 to gain a higher medical education in the U.S. Today Dr. B works as President and CEO of a medical facility with multiple locations in Southeast Michigan employing over 100 people. His company provides medical diagnostic and imaging services with the most advanced equipment to community members with limited income, ethnic minorities, and patients with special needs. Dr. B. serves on the board of multiple community, national and international organizations including the civil rights commission for the state of Michigan and many others focused on issues in Syria and human rights. As an active leader among Syrian-Americans in Detroit and nationally, Dr. B. very eagerly coordinates assistance for newly arrived Syrian refugees. He wants to help Syrian refugees adapt in the U.S., like he once had to, and feel safe. Community members throughout Michigan are already taking steps to help house refugees in neighborhoods close to the existing Syrian-American community. Dr. B. and other leaders have visited city officials and the school systems to assist the integration of Syrian refugees.

### **California - Executive Director of local NGO prepares to help Syrian refugee arrivals**

Ms. K. is the founder and Executive Director of a local non-profit organization in Orange County, California. Founded in 1998, the organization has grown to provide a wide array of social, legal and integration assistance to immigrants, refugees and citizens of lower income backgrounds. Ms. K., who grew up in Syria and is the daughter of Palestinian refugees, immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 17 because, as a young woman and a refugee, her family knew that her future would be better in the U.S. After marrying and having three children with American citizenship, Ms. K. found herself in a difficult marriage within a culture that is not accepting of divorce. When she did divorce in the 1990s, she sought counseling for herself and her children and found that local organizations were not designed for her needs. “The counselors didn’t understand me, my culture or religion, or my predicament. I realized many other women and children like me probably needed help too. So I went to the library and researched how to start a 501(c)3 in California. I rented a small office space for \$150 a month, got some folding chairs and a table, and started serving the community.” Ms. K.’s grassroots effort began with services to Arab- and Muslim-American mothers and children, but has grown into a thriving community based organization that provides full case management services, healthcare access services, education and ESL services, employment and tax preparation services, parenting and self-help classes, computer training, citizenship and immigration services, after-school programs for youth, and a wide array of civic engagement activities (Toys-for-Tots, National Arab-American Service Day, etc.). Ms. K.’s organization is nonsectarian, serving families and individuals of any faith and ethnicity, including many Iraqi Christian refugees that settled southern California after fleeing the conflict in Iraq. Ms. K. is eager to help Syrian refugees arriving to the U.S. regardless of their faith background. “If we want to make the world a better place for everyone, then we have to give everyone a chance. I had a chance here in the United States. That gave me the chance to help hundreds and even thousands more.”