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Syrian refugees in R.I. feel strain of family separation

Mental-health troubles escalate as hope for reunions in U.S. fades under Trump

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Mohamed Alshawaf appeared much older than his 70 years as he spoke about the trials his family is enduring.

"Every day, my wife won't go to sleep unless she talks to our children over there," Alshawaf, a Syrian refugee who came to the U.S. via Egypt in 2015, said in Arabic. "When she does, she is crying all the time."

Alshawaf's family is among 136 Syrian refugees resettled in Rhode Island, according to the Refugee Processing Center, a division of the U.S. Department of State. That community feels under siege following the U.S. Supreme Court's upholding of a near total travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries, including Syria, in June, as well as a January decision not to extend Temporary Protected Status to Syrians who arrived in the U.S. after August 2016.

Their stress intensified in September, when the Trump administration announced that it would only accept 30,000 refugees in the 2019 fiscal year — 15,000 fewer than the limit set for 2018.

The Alshawafs have 16 children and grandchildren living in both Syria and the refugee camps of southern Turkey who are unable to come to the U.S. Some live in Hama, which has escaped much of the conflict of Syria's civil war. But family members near his native Idlib have not been able to avoid the violence.

"We were hoping to reunite with the rest of our family here," Alshawaf said. "But then, gradually, we are finding that this reunion is becoming more difficult every day. At this moment, we are very sad. ... After this, there is not much hope."

In 2013, his profitable clothing store and home in Idlib province were destroyed in a bombardment by Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's forces. He spent time with family in Egypt, selling socks to help with the rent in an overcrowded two-bedroom apartment, before United Nations and U.S. authorities granted Alshawaf and six family members permission to move to the United States. He'd hoped that more family members would follow, but that hope was dashed by the September announcement.

Omar Bah, executive director of Providence's Refugee Dream Center, said the actual number of refugees admitted in 2019 will likely be much lower than the reduced cap of 30,000, judging from the disparity between the 2018 cap of 45,000 and the 22,491 refugees admitted through the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30. Based on that gap, Bah estimates that about 12,000 will be admitted in 2019, which he calls "a very big problem and a betrayal of refugees."

Kathleen Cloutier, executive director of Dorcas International Institute, said that Trump's so-called "Muslim ban" and the reduction in refugee admissions are increasing mental strife among populations — especially Syrians — trying to reunite with their families.

Samir Soulaïman, sitting outside a Providence tea house in his flowing white robe, agreed with that assessment.

"I would say that all of them have mental issues now," said Soulaïman, the treasurer of AHOPE, a refugee-aid organization founded at Masjid al-Kareem in Providence's South End. "You can tell that they are not at rest. ... They say, 'We do not know when [Trump] is going to wake up and tweet and we might be forced to leave.'"

Soulaïman — who immigrated from Syria before the civil war — noted that the stresses of that conflict have reached Rhode Island, and the effects can be seen in every age group.

"You can tell that there are some cases that need medical attention," said Soulaïman, adding that several times ambulances have been called to the mosque for those suffering from anxiety attacks and even stroke-like symptoms. "We're talking about guys in their 30s and 40s. ... Most of them are young."

"Almost everyone is less than 50. The elderly people tend to stay where they are," he said. "Coming to America is scary. ... It's like coming to the unknown."

He added that his organization — which works with non-Muslim refugees as well — does not have the financial or physical resources to meet all the needs of its clients.

"All I can really do to calm them," he said, "is put them in touch with their creator."

"They have some fear, that is maybe that some type of law will kick them out," he added. "We're really trying to assure them that that is not a one-man decision. They're trying to make it difficult for them to stay, and I tell them: don't give them that reason."

Nicole Nugent, the director of resilience and psychological services at the Hasbro Pediatric Refugee Clinic, has seen many mental-health issues among refugee populations over the years. She said the transition from a war zone to a land at peace that speaks a different language can be challenging.

"When you're just trying to get by, the way you parent a 1- or 2-year-old is very different from when you're in the U.S. and safe," she said. "Imagine you have a 2-year-old, and for the last two years all you needed is for that baby to not scream, so you're going to do what it needs."

"Now, you have a 2-year old and you want your 2-year old to sleep at night time and be awake at the daytime and move towards acquiring words," Nugent said. "The priority shifts from, you're just trying to stay alive. ... This causes a lot of stress in the family."

Yet she has noticed a sharp change in attitudes among the populations she works with.

"The biggest shift I saw, honestly, is when Trump came into office," she said. "It gave a lot of people who may have kept their opinions quiet in the old days license to express hateful thoughts because they now say, 'I'm in the majority now.'"

"What I observed from my families in the Obama years is that kids were chronically bullied," she said; now, schoolyard bullying has given way to more widespread harassment. "Since Trump was voted into the office, I've observed that it's qualitatively changed. They're not really safe anymore, and now they're getting flak from people on the street."

This can compound the trauma that these populations have already experienced, she said.

"I feel that our families are just a little bit more raw because of the things they've gone through," she said. "All of a sudden now, post-traumatic stress that we sometimes already treated comes back in a new way."

Symptoms can include social withdrawal, bed-wetting, memory loss, flashbacks, intrusive memories and aggravation of previous medical conditions. Many of Nugent's patients tell her they're troubled by feelings of guilt.

"I keep hearing from families how grateful they are and how fortunate they are and how guilty they feel about the other people who are not safe back in their homes," she said. "There's a lot of guilt, and it's really heartbreaking. Sometimes, parents will come in and say, 'I can't get my child to eat.' Then the kids will say, 'I just keep thinking about my cousin who can't eat or buy clothes.'"

Alshawaf, who is a diabetic, said his doctor tells him that the stress of dealing with his family's separation is affecting his health.

"Every time I think about it, my sugar levels go up to 200," he said.

"But the one most affected is my wife," he added, describing her struggles to recover from recent surgeries. "It's something that you really cannot put aside or forget about it."

Though Alshawaf is retired, he and his wife do what they can to help those back home, sending \$50 or \$100 when they can.

"I try to reduce what I eat and find ways to save money so I can send it to them," he said. "The food stamps that I get are enough for my sustenance. But other things, I'd rather not buy ... so I can put some money aside."

Many refugees have said they want to return home, but that is simply not an option when home is a war zone, said Alshawaf.

"I wish that I could go back if the situation is OK for me to do so," he said. "In these situations, we can't go back unless the regime changes."

Yet a reunion in Rhode Island seems a far-off dream.

"We always hope, but now I suffer from poor memory," he said. "Old age is settling in, and we are always afraid that we will die and not see them."

"There is nothing we can do."

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