



Jad Qatta, 12, holds the "Welcome to Canada" sign his family's sponsors brought to Pearson Airport when they arrived on Dec. 16 2016. The sign now hangs framed in their Etobicoke home. (ELLEN SAMEK/TORONTO OBSERVER)

 SPECIAL REPORTS • TORONTO • News

How Syrian refugees are adjusting to their new lives in Toronto

Many are dealing with cultural and language issues and a civil war they can't entirely leave behind

By Trisha Sales, Ellen Samek, Mouhamad Rachini, Jessica Lam and Louise Allyn Palma on October 1st, 2018.

The Syrian civil war seems to have no end. The alleged use of chemical weapons by the troops of President Bashar al-Assad on April 7, 2018, led to the United States, the U.K. and France responding with missile strikes. All of this happened as the seventh anniversary of the war, which started in March 2011, came and went.

As Syria continues to crumble, Syrian refugees in Canada have been quietly settling into their new lives. A total of [40,081 Syrian refugees have arrived in](#)

[Canada since Nov. 4, 2015.](#)

Although the initial wave of Syrians being processed through Canada's airports is over, many more are scheduled to arrive in 2018.

The *Toronto Observer* checked in with some of the recent Syrian newcomers to see how they are adjusting to their new lives — and also spoke with some refugees who are still waiting to come to Canada.

New country, new lives

Ruba Bilal and her family already feel Canadian, despite arriving only 15 months ago as refugees.

They've spent summer weekends exploring hiking trails and canoeing at a cottage near the Thousand Islands. They've tried skating, ice fishing and, of course, poutine. They spent their first Canadian New Year's at Nathan Phillips Square watching the annual concert, and eagerly awaited trick-or-treaters to ring their doorbell on Halloween.

They even had a real tree for their first white Christmas. As Muslims, they never celebrated the holiday before.

The "Welcome to Canada" sign their sponsors gave them at the airport is framed and hangs in the entrance of the small house they rent in Etobicoke. It's the first thing you see when you walk in the door.

"I could spend hours talking about our experiences in Canada," says Bilal. "I have been so amazed with the kindness we have experienced."

Says her husband, Abad Qatta: “From the day we arrived, our sponsors wanted us to embrace Canadian life.”

The Syrian family of three arrived in Canada via Lebanon on Dec. 15, 2016. They consider themselves luckier than most.

“We left before the violence started to escalate a lot. As a Syrian, you are always afraid that someone will take you [into custody] for nothing,” Bilal explains. “They could have taken him (Abad) for military service without even asking him. [The army and the police] were taking people from the streets.”

The family moved from Damascus to Beirut in July 2012, but never felt secure.

“We faced a lot of problems there with residency, permit to work. There are a lot of problems for the Syrians in Lebanon because of the refugee crisis,” she says.

Yet going back to Syria was not an option. The family submitted an application for asylum in the nick of time for the March 31, 2015, midnight deadline. The paperwork took only eight months to process back then, because the Canadian government sped up the timelines to meet Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s promised quotas. Today, it can take up to 24 months to process an asylum application from Lebanon.


Bilal and her family are officially sponsored by the United Church of Canada. [The United Church is a registered Sponsorship Agreement Holder with the Government of Canada.](#) This means the sponsor covers the financial costs and the paperwork for the refugees. The on-the-ground resettlement work, like finding housing, for example, is done by three Toronto families specially trained by the sponsor.

The family left almost everything behind, except of course, their beloved dog Lucky.

“We got her when she was one-year-old, so she’s been with us for seven years,” says 12-year-old son Jad. “She had quite the adventure coming here.”

The family believes their dog was mistreated by portage workers during a layover at Cairo International Airport. When they arrived in Toronto, they found that Lucky had suffered a broken leg and lost a nail. Her cage was broken.

“When the dog got to one of our sponsors’ home, her tail was wagging 150 miles per hour even though she was in pain,” says Bilal. “She was very dirty. But now she’s happy and healed.”



Bilal and husband Abad, 39, were able to find jobs relatively quickly after taking training courses in their respective fields. Abad had always worked in marketing and Bilal had worked at a not-for-profit.

Abad got his first job at Sears Canada, in marketing, before the company went into bankruptcy protection and shut down its remaining stores in January 2018. He's since been able to find another job in marketing. Bilal found a job in human resources, seven months after arriving.

“Whatever success we've had here, I give all the credit to our sponsors, because without their mentorship, help, support and guidance, we would have been unable to do things we did,” says Abad. “Their help was amazing, the way they helped us to embrace the Canadian way of life.”

He is particularly proud of how their son, Jad, has thrived, with the sponsors' help.

Jad is in Grade 6 and loves science class at his middle school in Etobicoke. He proudly shows off what he calls his library: a shelf full of English books he's collected since arriving. He had to leave all of his books behind in Beirut.

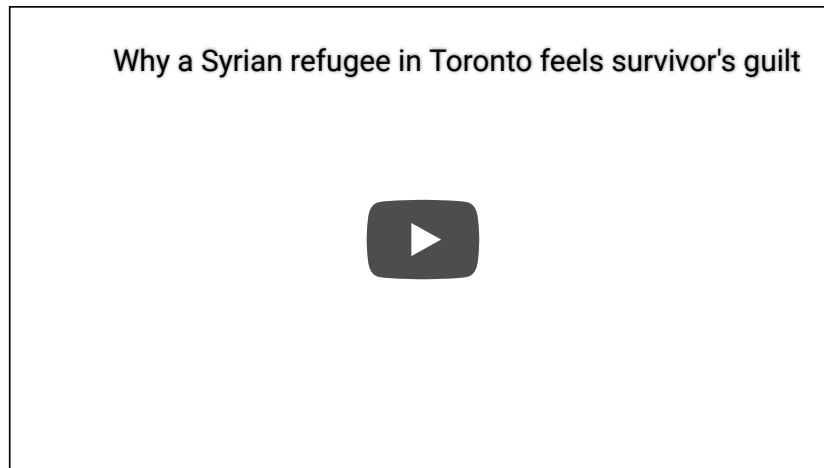
He dreams of becoming an astronaut.

Despite their success and happiness, Syria is never far from their minds.

“You have the feeling of survivor's guilt,” says Bilal. “I think most of the Syrians (here) feel the same. We all have this trauma.”

Bilal says her mother and all of Abad's family still live in Damascus. They have an older son, although they did not say much about him when the *Toronto*

Observer asked, only that he lives in Germany and they hope he will join them in Canada soon.



Ruba Bilal, a Syrian refugee living in Toronto, is glad to be safe in Canada now, but she can't stop worrying about those relatives she left behind.

“Social media and the internet help you to stay updated and communicate with your family, but on the other side you keep hearing the bad news. You feel that, ‘I’m here and I’m lucky here because others are dying and not because I deserve it.’ Everyone deserves to be in a safe place.”

Yet if the war in Syria ended tomorrow, Bilal and her husband say they wouldn’t return. The safety and security they enjoy now in Canada are too precious to give up.

“Syria will need many years before life there can go back to normal. I just want to have a better future for me, my husband and my sons.”

Christ Ketenjian is adapting to life in Canada stupendously well, and so is his family.

Christ, now 16, came to Canada as a refugee from Aleppo, Syria, in late 2015, with his father, Kerob, his mother, Jeny, and his twin sister, Christina.

But it was quite the journey to get here. When the war broke out in 2012, his family was in Aleppo for the first 10 days of the fighting. Although they didn’t see any of the violence, they heard the fighter bomber aircraft flying above.

“The second day of the fighting, I thought I was going to die,” Ketenjian says, adding that he didn’t know what was going to happen. “It was hard.”

Soon, his family left on a trip to Armenia.

“I was in Armenia for a month, and then we saw that Syria was under war and told not to come [back home], so we went to Lebanon,” Ketenjian says.

They would shuttle back and forth to Armenia for four years, looking for steady work, before a Canadian named Harout sponsored them privately to come to Canada.

The sponsor was a member of the [Armenian Community Centre of Toronto](#) in North York, a mere six-minute drive from the apartment that Christ and his family now live in.

In 2014, the community centre started recruiting members who were willing to sponsor refugees, with the help of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church. By October 2015, they had collected enough people to qualify to apply to be sponsors.

Vatche Ayvazian is a member of the Armenian Community Centre of Toronto, where he teaches children about Armenian culture and also participates in the basketball club, which is where he met the eager 16-year-old newcomer, Christ. Ayvazian remembers the day the refugees arrived.

“It was Dec. 15, 2015. I was in high school at the time,” Ayvazian said. “My high school was right beside the church.”

Ayvazian and his friends decided to go for lunch at the community centre. That’s where they spotted the CBC, CTV, and CP24 news vans.

“At the time, we were all curious, me and my friends, so we went up to the community centre leader and we were like, ‘What’s going on? Why are there news cars coming?’,” said Ayvazian, now a student at Centennial College.

It turned out that there were two coach buses on their way to the community centre from Toronto’s Pearson International Airport. They were going to drop off the first Syrian families.

When the buses finally arrived, Ayzayian and his friends witnessed reporters swarming across the parking lot to interview them.

“Seeing that, it was very weird but it was relieving,” he said. Many of the newcomers have now become his close friends.

Ayvazian decided to contribute as best he could, by inviting the Syrians to attend his lectures on Armenian culture. “Whatever they needed, I wanted to help out as much as I can,” Ayvazian said.

Syrian-Armenian refugee shares his family's journey to Canada



Christ Ketenjian is a Syrian-Armenian teenager living in Canada as a refugee. His family arrived in Toronto from Lebanon in October 2015. Ketenjian says he and his family see a brighter future in Canada because of the education and employment opportunities. He spoke with Toronto Observer reporters Jessica Lam and Trisha Sales.

Events are still held every Friday at the community centre. It is where the adults hang out and the kids play together. Christ and his family quickly became regular community members.

“Usually the sponsor helps find a place but for us, we said, ‘Just bring us here. We will find a place. We will do it,’” Ketenjian said in a recent interview in their North York apartment..

His uncle had come to Canada a month earlier and was living in an apartment across the street from where the Ketenjian family lives now. When they first came, they stayed with his uncle.

“The first day we arrived here, we want to find a place, you know? Like two families in the same house, that’s not too comfortable,” Ketenjian said. “So the second day, we went to look for a house we’d like to live in. A month after we came here, we found this place.”

His family did accept the community centre’s help, however, to find affordable furniture for their new place. Their living room now contains red leather sofas and chairs, that match the black coffee table in the centre.

They have made themselves at home by putting a cardboard Easter bunny up on the front door and decorating the dining room table with Easter eggs and a chocolate display.

As for finding jobs, his family was also able to do that all on their own.

The second week they got here, Christ’s dad, Kerob Ketenjian, passed his full G driving licence. From there, he started working as an Uber driver.

Christ’s mom, Jeny Ketenjian, managed to get a job as an officer at the local mall, five months after the family arrived. Her job includes keeping track of the amount of staff in the mall.

As soon as Christ arrived in Canada, he started the second semester of Grade 9 at Senator O’Connor College School. He is now in Grade 11.

“The education here is good. I have friends in Syria, they want to come to Canada for the education,” he says.

When asked if he would ever go back to Syria, Ketenjian said he would not.

“My future is here. When I have kids, their future will be here, not in Syria or Lebanon.”

Ketenjian spoke to his guidance counsellor at school about his options for the future. The counsellor recommended pursuing a career in accounting.

“She said, ‘If you start planning for accounting, in four or five years, you can make thousands of dollars,’” Ketenjian said. “It makes good money.”

He has it all planned out. His top choice for college is Seneca. For university, he is considering both Ryerson University and the University of Toronto.

“I’m planning to go to college for four semesters, two years. Then transfer to university for two years,” he says.

Christ’s twin sister, Christina, is planning to become a pharmacist.

The Ketenjian family still has relatives in Syria and Lebanon. Christ hopes that one day, they will be able to join him in Canada for a brighter future.

🔍 [ENLARGE](#)



Muneer al Zahabi finally made it to Canada after several sponsorship groups doubted him. He lives with his two sons, Sami and Karam, his wife Lubna and his daughter Sara in North York.

TRISHA SALES/TORONTO OBSERVER

In 2016, Muneer al Zahabi, was one of the Syrian refugees who desperately wanted to settle in Canada. While still living in Jordan, he told his story to the *Toronto Star*. He contacted several community groups and organizations that sponsored Syrian refugees, but many doubted his story. Today, Zahabi and his family are living in Toronto, through private sponsorship.

“At the time that story was published, I wasn’t sure that it was going to be a success and that I will be able to come here,” Zahabi says. “It wasn’t like that. So the process took one and a half years between submitting.”

He spent almost four years in Jordan before arriving in Toronto on May 10, 2017. Before that he lived in Damascus, Syria. Now, the family, including three

children, Sami, Sara and Karam, and his wife Lubna, lives in an apartment near a TTC subway station, making it easy for travel. The kids are attending school and daycare, while both parents work hard to complete the process for settling.

Zahabi and his wife are both taking ESL class. Zahabi would like to take his family to discover the different tourist attractions in Toronto, but for now, he says that completing the settlement process is more important.

A Syrian refugee in Toronto speaks about the struggle he had to come to Ca...



In 2016, Muneer al Zahabi was one of the Syrian refugees who desperately wanted to settle in Canada. Today, Zahabi and his family are living in Toronto, through private sponsorship. He spoke with The Toronto Observer's Trisha Sales.

Zahabi mentioned how the publication of his story in the local newspaper did help him make it to Canada, indirectly.


Of the hundreds of emails he sent to sponsorship organizations while in Jordan, one found its way to Patricia Chartier. She couldn't help him right away through her Toronto-based sponsorship group, but they remained in contact. Later, he was able to connect with the Rotary Club of Toronto, a non-profit organization, which agreed to act as sponsors. Chartier became their reference. She and the family remain good friends.

"We reached out to her, and they (Rotary Club) asked her about us and that time; things started to move for real," Zahabi says. "Before meeting her, it wasn't quite clear."

Zahabi says their experience as privately sponsored refugees is different from most government-sponsored families, who do not know who they are seeing in the airport when they arrive, or who is going to assist them throughout their settlement in Canada.

"We're used to speaking with them [our sponsors] every week, follow-ups, so the process was very clear for us. So they were with us, step by step, from the time we were in Jordan, until the time we reached here," Zahabi says.

It took a while for the family to adjust. He says he heard great things about Toronto before arriving in Canada. The diversity, opportunities and his free will to practise his Muslim faith are, among many other things, what made his experience valuable.



Every day, 25-year-old Gazal Alkak studies English at the [Polycultural Immigrant & Community Services LINC](#) school near her family's apartment in Scarborough. She hoped to start a part-time job as a barista at Starbucks in May.

But every night, no matter how busy her new Canadian life gets, she dreams of her family's home in Idlib, Syria. She can still smell the flowers from her mother's garden.

The Alkak family fled from Syria to Turkey after a bomb destroyed their home in 2014.

"It shocked us," Alkak says. "We (my family) were all just sitting like we are now and suddenly something pushed us. We didn't know what was happening. It was so scary."

Alkak's 19-year-old brother Mohamed was severely injured in the blast.

Doctors couldn't remove all the pieces of shrapnel; the long scar on his abdomen is a constant reminder.

"Somedays I still feel it inside of me when I move," says Mohamed.

There are eight siblings in the Alkak family. Gazal and her four youngest siblings (two brothers and two sisters) lived together with their mother Thanaa. They also have an older brother and other sisters, who are married, with families of their own. Their father, Khaled, died of cancer in 2012.

They all fled to Turkey except Gazal, who stayed behind to live in Aleppo for another two years.

“I stayed in Syria because I had to finish my studies. I moved to Turkey when I finished my degree.”

While war raged, and with her family miles away, Gazal completed her degree in international law at the University of Aleppo. Her dream is to be a lawyer.

The longest battle of the war took place in Aleppo from 2012 to 2016.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a U.K.-based NGO, says [21,452 Syrian civilians were killed in Aleppo from 2011 to 2016](#).

Eventually Gazal joined her family in Turkey, where they lived for two years and where they eventually registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be considered for resettlement.

They feel lucky to have crossed the border into Turkey legally before the government closed it.

“We got a phone call from the UN in 2016 and they said, ‘Do you want to move to Canada?’ This was the first time I heard of Canada,” says Gazal. “When we found out we were accepted, I will never forget that day.”

The entire process took nine months. The family landed in Toronto on Oct. 5, 2016.

The Alkak family were six of the [6,742 government-sponsored Syrian refugees who arrived in Ontario between November 2015 and July 2016](#).

“I remember the day we came here. When we were in the sky, it was like a dream,” says Gazal. When we arrived to Canada I saw big trees, big buildings. We don’t have high buildings in Syria.”

Today, they live in a small apartment in Scarborough and get by on government assistance while the family continues to learn English. They say that their English skills have not been good enough to find employment. At the moment, only Gazal has found a job possibility.

“The most difficult thing has been the language,” she says. “We all started from level zero and, step by step, we have been able to communicate with other people better. We were very stressed in the beginning. We would miss doctor’s appointments because we didn’t understand the secretary on the phone. I felt so isolated because I really wanted to connect with other people.”

Despite the hardships and limited support network, the family feels safe, secure and hopeful about their future.

Government-sponsored refugees have a case worker who assists them for only one year. They arrived on Oct. 5, 2016.

“We need to do things by ourselves now. It’s our lives, and we need to be independent.”

They are making inroads: Mohamed and his sweet tooth can’t get enough chocolate Timbits.

Gazal’s younger sister, Rama, 20, wants to become a police officer and is proud of herself for getting her driver’s licence.

Zoulfa, 14, started high school this year. She loves English class and playing soccer with her friends after school.

Ahmad, 13, the youngest, loves math class and playing Minecraft.

Like all Syrian refugees in Canada, the Alkaks were granted permanent residency in Canada and, under Canadian law, will be eligible for citizenship after five years of living in Canada.

Still, they miss home.

The family regularly shops at Ghadir Meat and Restaurant on Lawrence Ave. E. in Scarborough. The Syrian food and Arab coffee they buy there soothes the homesickness, but only temporarily. The thought of aunts, uncles and friends still in Syria, and two older sisters who live in Turkey with their husbands and children, is painful.

“It’s hard to think about them. I am here, and I am comfortable and happy. I can have a good future, but what about the other people in my country?” says Gazal.

The Alkak siblings all hope their sisters will join them in Canada as refugees.

Gazal plans to enrol in law school and have her earlier degree accredited, once she finishes studying English.

Her career dreams, while delayed by war, are still alive.

Lost in translation

Refugee support workers discuss biggest barriers facing Syrians

To Nada Nezam, interpreting for newly arrived Syrian refugees isn't just about helping non-English speakers settle into Canada. It's about reconnecting with a country the Damascus-born Toronto woman had to abandon herself six years ago.

"I'm a Syrian," Nezam says during an interview at a Scarborough condominium on a recent Sunday morning. "So these people are considered my people, and we share the same experiences [and] the same events that led these people to leave their homes and come as refugees to Canada."

Nezam immigrated to Canada in 2012. Although she didn't leave Syria as a refugee, she says that the war and her children's studies forced her to depart the country.

"The war affected the universities. The war affected the living environment," she says. "In the living environment, you no longer had security ... and the private universities were outside of our area. So there was fear over [my kids]. There was no safety [in case of a possible] road blockage or a bombing, for example."

In 2015, she began working as an interpreter for the federal Immigration and Refugee Board, as well as other immigration service agencies. She wanted to connect with Syrians, and Arabic-speaking immigrants in general, who were seeking a new life in Canada.

"Whenever they speak about their struggle because of the war, [or] whenever they speak about their losses ... it was really tough to work with them," she says. "Especially at the hospitals, and you are seeing what they are going through."

With roughly 50,000 Syrian refugees accepted into Canada since Justin Trudeau was elected prime minister in October 2015, immigrant service workers, such as interpreters and social-service workers, have been dealt the bulk of the responsibility in terms of introducing refugees to Canadian society.

This has resulted in many immigration services struggling to keep up with the numbers.

“Before the Syrians came, we didn’t need that much help because we were doing great,” says Nagham Fawaz, a social service worker with COSTI Immigrant Services. “But when the new [Canadian] government came, they brought a lot of refugees, and we weren’t able to keep up with the numbers as a company.”

In order to cope with these increases, social-service workers do not focus on more than a case at a time, while interpreters usually don’t see more than two families per day. But while that issue can be dealt with, there are some emotional challenges that impact those working with refugees.

“Sometimes, I want to cry,” says Souha Hamam, an Access Alliance interpreter who translates for Syrian refugees. “Deep inside of me ... I feel with them, because I came from Lebanon [and] when I came, my husband sponsored me ... They are like my neighbours.”

As an interpreter, Hamam is expected to maintain a professional attitude, although at times she has heard stories that have made her feel sympathetic with her clients.

“Imagine one story: A lady entered from the illegal [TTC] entrance,” she says. “She had money in her hand, but she entered from the bus way, and they arrested her. She didn’t understand. She was crying, so I felt sorry for her.”

Stories like this are not uncommon. Syrian refugees are often found in situations involving officials and professional workers, and as a result interpreters have been caught in the crossfire.

“I had an assignment at SickKids [Hospital] one day, and a boy who was 16-years-old had cancer,” Hamam recalls. “The first words that the doctor said were, ‘Your son is not going to survive.’”

The father immediately asked the son to leave the room, as is the Syrian custom, but the doctor insisted that the teen stay and give consent.

“And mom starts crying ... [and] to be honest, I started crying with them, because how am I going to interpret?”

Souha Hamam, an Access Alliance interpreter, explains the struggle she faced when she had to tell a young boy's family he had cancer.

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Cultural differences can serve as obstacles for Syrian refugees, and this applies to the language barrier between the refugees and native English speakers.

“The disaster that we are seeing is language,” says Rana Ammar, a settlement counsellor with Mennonite New Life Centre. “What is keeping families from not being able to do anything is language. There is no way that they can catch English. For some of them, it’s impossible.”

According to Nagham Fawaz, this makes life even more difficult for Syrians because they must be accompanied by an interpreter for almost every need.

“They always need an interpreter,” she says. “If they go to a medical appointment or to school; every single thing in their life, they need an interpreter. Because without language, you cannot access services. You cannot access anything.”

Nada Nizam believes that their difficulty in learning English stems from their inability to learn the basics of their mother tongue, Arabic.

“Most of these people who were affected by the war are coming from the surrounding areas; the border areas,” she says. “[Therefore] the education chances for them are not the same as the ones from the big cities.

“Most of them, they used to work as farmers, so they don’t have the knowledge or education of their own language at the first place. So imagine when they come here and they have to start from zero learning a new language.”

These cultural limitations are a significant problem in the medical field, too. Due to their upbringing, many Syrian refugees refuse to visit psychologists or seek mental-health help because of the cultural stigma surrounding them.

“Some of them actually need this service, but they don’t want to tell anyone and they don’t want to speak about it,” Ammar says. “They need support, but because culturally if you say that ‘I’m visiting a psychologist’, they will think that you have a mental issue.”

Nada Nizam agrees.

“Mental-health issues are not, well, let’s say, discussed in Syrian culture in general,” she says. “So we don’t care about this issue, or we never speak about it.”

As a result, some services that were originally offered to Syrians have ceased operations.

“When we opened the [mental-health] office in our centre for the Arabic-speaking community, they brought a psychological counsellor to deal with the mental issues,” Ammar says. “Now we closed this program for Syrians specifically because culturally it’s not acceptable.”

These closures are important because, according to the interpreters, mental health is one of the most significant obstacles for Syrian refugees.

“It’s a very big challenge because these people ... are totally traumatized,” Nizam says. “And sometimes trauma will hinder them from learning a language or getting involved again in the community that is totally new for them.”

It doesn’t help that for some privately sponsored refugees, their sponsors end up abandoning them upon their arrival to Canada.

“Some of the sponsors are doing their job to their best,” Ammar says. “But some of them just brought the family, they found an apartment for them, and that’s it.”

Ammar recalls a Syrian family who recently visited her, wanting to complain about their sponsors for not helping them settle into the country.

“The sponsors who brought [them], they did not find an apartment specifically for them,” she says. “One of their sponsors has a house. So she made them live in this house ... and they brought another family to live in the basement, and there’s no separate entrance for them.”

These issues, Ammar says, have a notable impact on the mental stability of the Syrian refugees.

“They are so depressed,” she says. “They come to the office and they sometimes want to scream because they say, ‘Why did they bring us here? If they don’t want to do what they are supposed to do, why did they bring us here?’”

Fortunately for Syrian refugees, the Canadian government has tried to fill in this void.

“The government is working so hard to help them,” Hamam says. “We now have more community centres [and] healthcare community centres ... and interpretation is free.”

In the end, Nizam believes that, whether they receive help or not, Syrian refugees have earned the right to live and succeed in Canada, and that they should be respected like any other citizen.

“For most people in Canada, [Syrian refugees] might be seen as disabled people, but in my opinion they are abled people because they are survivors,” she says. “They are survivors of war; of hardship; and they made it to Canada. So we should change our opinions about these people and give them a chance.”

Mental Health: Psychiatrists' Perspective



It isn't because of a lack of psychotherapy, or difficulty in finding a psychiatrist. If Syrian refugees' mental health is deteriorating, it is because they are unable to get properly set up to begin new lives in Canada, according to experts.

Dr. Clare Pain is a Toronto psychiatrist and the director of the Psychological Trauma Program at Mount Sinai Hospital. She is also an expert for the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)'s Immigrant and Refugee Mental Health Project.

DR. CLARE PAIN



She is the director of the Psychological Trauma Clinic at Mount Sinai Hospital, and works as a psychiatrist. She is also a subject matter expert for CAMH's Immigrant and Refugee Mental Health Project.

“I don't think mental health is only delivered by psychiatrists,” says Dr. Pain. “It's delivered by good infrastructure.”

“I think we have medicalized the problems of refugees ... instead of seeing people who are under stress because they need to learn the language, find a job, support their families, enculturate to an entirely new environment.”

She cautions people not to assume that just because the refugees survived a war, they are mentally ill.

“We tend to think, ‘Oh my gosh, these poor people they've been through some awful trauma, they must be traumatized, they must be patients.’”

She said not all Syrian refugees have PTSD, or any type of severe stress disorder, because of the experience they had fled from.

Dr. Clare Pain speaks about why Canada's Syrian Refugees face Ment...



Instead, when psychiatrists see Syrian refugees, they notice that their stress stems from a continued inability to get used to living in Canada.

In 2012, CAMH created the Immigrant and Refugee Mental Health Project. It is a series of courses and webinars for mental-health service workers and settlement workers to improve their knowledge and their practical skills when dealing with new immigrants and refugees. Specifically, these courses explore the possibilities in mitigating the “healthy immigrant effect,” according to Aamna Ashraf, the project’s director.

“You have to be able to understand what the needs are. In terms of how people are utilizing service, how they see service, what the stigma is, why they are not coming to mainstream services, how come we’re not seeing them,” Ashraf says.

In 2017, they provided two courses: a general one on the overall refugee mental-health issue and a special one focusing on Syrian refugees. These courses and webinars are all voluntary. Over 7,000 participants enrolled; 400 people were on the waiting list.

A new course will launch this fall, with updated information regarding refugees and immigrants.

One of the participants, Annik Thèrberge, is a settlement worker in Yellowknife with Settlement Workers in Schools, led by the Economic Development Council of the Northwest Territories. After taking the course, she felt better prepared to handle the needs of refugees.

“I find that it’s really good for health professionals to know the specific health issues of this population,” she says. “And it’s also helped them accommodate for that specific population’s needs and about the exact conditions they had in their country of origin.”

Despite the attempt to understand the conditions that hinder the mental health of Syrian refugees, another barrier that obstructs this population from receiving formal mental-health care is cultural stigma.

It is common to all the Syrian refugees Dr. Pain has dealt with.

“In many countries, people don’t want mental-health services because those services are only for the insane. Psychotic. Severely mentally ill,” she says.

Even with this cultural stigma, Thérberge does not think this is an assumption healthcare workers should have.

“You just have to know how to bring the conversation out to build a good relation of trust with them, and how to make them comfortable and safe in order to make them talk about it,” she says.

“They are not mentally ill people. Some have underlying mental disorders, but most of them come seeking safety to Canada, and once they are safe and they get into good settlement services – that’s the treatment that they need.”

Despite making it past the bombs and the horrors of war, they could still suffer isolation and anxiety due to a language barrier if they are unable to properly integrate.

“So, when we want to understand people’s suffering, it is related to ‘Are their relative’s safe?’ ‘Do they have enough money?’ ‘Can they take the TTC?’ ‘Can they speak to their kids’ teachers?’ Those are the things that really reduce the stress and help people find their feet,” Pain says.

The refugees yet to come

When Stephen Watt started volunteering with Community Matters Toronto, he never expected he would end up sponsoring 35 Syrian refugees.

Watt, the communications manager at the Rotman School of Management in Toronto, showed up to the first meeting in 2015 that aimed to somehow help Syrian refugees. Syrians were arriving in great numbers, and they were going to need help when they arrived.

“I work in marketing, so I helped make a Facebook page and a video in both English and Arabic advertising the services for newcomers at Community Matters,” says Watt.

The video went viral.

“It was a scary surprise,” he says. “When I posted the video on a page called Syrian Sanctuary, devoted to this issue, we got 10,000 views overnight and got hundreds of messages from Syrians who were desperate to come to Canada.”

Watt decided to respond to their messages. It changed everything.

“When I first volunteered, I wasn’t really that into the issue of refugees. What changed was talking to the people who contacted me,” he says. “They aren’t faceless images of people in camps. They’re normal, ordinary people like you and me. It really brought the issue home and made me realize I have to do everything I can.”

He is now involved in a number of groups that work to sponsor and resettle Syrian refugees.

Watt is personally sponsoring his 35 people and helping dozens more with things like paperwork and finding resources.

He met all of them on Facebook.

“What’s been happening over the last two and a half years is that people have the English ability or just the ability to use social media. They’re going to volunteers and sponsors directly, bypassing the usual channels,” says Watt.

In September 2017, he travelled to the Middle East for three weeks to visit some of the refugees in person.

“One of the great takeaways is that people really are who I thought they were, just a bit better,” says Watt. “When you know people through social media, you think they’re editing themselves, but no one misrepresented themselves. They were exactly as advertised.”

Wasim Meslmani is one of these refugees.

The 30-year-old was studying nutrition at the University of Aleppo when his life was put on pause. Fear of forced conscription prompted him and his brother Hassan to flee to the United Arab Emirates. War broke out as their work permits came to an end, while at the same time their beloved city was reduced to rubble.

“We cannot go back,” Meslmani says in a Skype interview with *Toronto Observer* from the [Jabal el-Hussain](#) refugee camp near Amman, Jordan. “There is nothing left to go back to.”

Meslmani, his brother and their parents originally applied for refugee status in the United States. Their older brother and a sister have lived there for a few years.

Their parents were accepted and now live in Houston. Meslmani and his brother were rejected.

“I think we were rejected because of the politics there, and the new president,” says Meslmani. “We are just happy our parents are safe.”

They have another sister who is still stranded in Aleppo. Her pregnancy made it difficult. She has since had her child. They keep in touch sporadically via WhatsApp, when she can access cell service.

Like most Syrian refugees in a UN camp, Meslmani and his brother live a restricted existence. They are not permitted to work legally or go to school. They can’t even leave the camp where they live. Police checkpoints make it nearly impossible to travel.

To pass the time, Meslmani created a [Facebook group called: Hand to Hand: Supporting Newcomers to Canada.](#)

He started the group in October 2017 to help other refugees who live in Canada or are waiting to go. He posts links to resources like English classes, where to get help with paperwork, food banks, job fairs and training sessions.

The group has 1,559 members, most of them Syrian refugees in Canada and Canadians who want to help. It has become a hub for networking and finding sponsors.

He also volunteers as an English tutor for other refugees in the camp. (“It makes me feel human again.”)

They hope to arrive in Canada in the fall. A change in policy now allows single Syrian men to be eligible for sponsorship.

“When I get to Canada, I want to go back to school as soon as possible and continue studying nutrition,” Meslmani says. “I want to continue volunteering with refugees and work in the community where I live. Canada is helping me, so I want to help Canada.”

Canada’s private sponsorship program that is helping Syrians like Meslmani and his brother is unique in the world, but the requirements are strict.

“You have to have a group of people that are willing to be financially responsible for these people,” says Watt. “It’s a big commitment. \$12,600 needs to be raised for each person.”

In addition to the sponsors and finances, refugees who want to come to Canada through private sponsorship need a certificate from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be eligible.

“Refugees sponsored by Groups of Five and Community Sponsors must include a proof of refugee status recognition document from the UN Refugee Agency or foreign state with their application,” writes Shannon Kerr, a communications advisor at the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, in an email.

These certificates have become notoriously difficult to get, and wait times are getting longer, Watt says.

“The government sold this idea you can quickly bring someone here in a few months and help them. But that’s not the reality.”

According to a Canadian government website, wait times for privately sponsored refugees applying from Jordan is 24 months.

From Turkey it’s 23 months, Lebanon 20 months.

These wait times change on a regular basis.

“They are extremely vetted, at least the ones coming to Canada: once by the UN when they get the certificate and again by the [Canadian] government,” Watt says. “They need to account for every second of their lives since they turned 18. Every address, every school and workplace. It’s a very onerous process.”

The federal government says 18,000 refugees, including Syrians like Wasim Meslmani and his brother, will arrive in Canada in 2018.



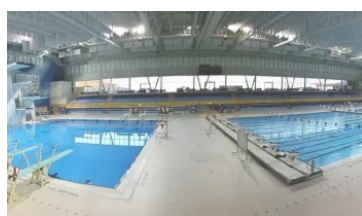
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