

Escape to America

After fleeing devastation and civil war in their homeland, young Syrian refugees are trying to build new lives in the U.S.

BY HAILEE ROMAIN



Bombs and air attacks have reduced much of Syria, including this neighborhood outside Damascus, to rubble.

There were many new things that 18-year-old Yaman Alsaadi had to adjust to when he arrived in the United States in 2016 as a refugee from Syria: The language, which he didn't speak. Snowstorms, which he'd never seen before. High school football games and school dances, which were both confusing and intimidating.

But in some ways, the toughest and most important adjustment was getting used to living in a safe place. In his old neighborhood in Damascus, the capital of Syria, just walking to school meant risking imprisonment, kidnapping, or being shot to death.

"Walking down the street in Syria was scary because it was so unsafe and very bad things could happen to you," he says, sitting in his new home in Des Moines, Iowa. "Now that I'm in a safe country, I'm only afraid of being in a new place and speaking a new language. It's a better kind of fear—a small fear."

For seven years, Syria has been mired in a brutal civil war. More than 400,000 people have died and another 5 million have fled the country. Yaman and his family, who started their new lives in Des Moines last fall, are among the more than 20,000 Syrian refugees admitted to the United States since the civil war began. Gaining entry to the U.S. as a refugee is a cumbersome process that can take years, and those who succeed must then try to rebuild their lives in a culture they've never known.

"They often arrive in the United States with some form of trauma and a lot of stress, and are immediately expected to integrate into the community," says Danielle Grigsby, the associate director of Refugee Council USA, a coalition of nonprofit groups that work to help refugees. "Especially for refugees that don't speak English, those are some major stressors and hurdles."

For Yaman and his family—his mother, father, and younger sister—the journey to America began in 2012 after bombs destroyed their home in Damascus. They fled to Jordan with



Yaman Alsaadi
now lives in Des Moines. He's looking forward to going to college and hopes to be an immigration lawyer.

thousands of other refugees. At first, they hoped the war would end and they could return to Syria. But after four years in a refugee camp, "we got tired of waiting," Yaman remembers.

Fingerprints & Background Checks

Only a small percentage of refugees* are offered permanent homes in other countries. So when United Nations aid workers, who handle the early stages of refugee resettlement, asked the Alsaadis if they'd like to apply for entry into the U.S., they jumped at the chance.

The application for resettlement includes a complex vetting process to screen out potential threats. It can take up to two years and involves intense scrutiny by the Department of Homeland Security, the F.B.I., and the State Department. Before being accepted for resettlement, the Alsaadis, while still living in the refugee camp, were interviewed four times, fingerprinted, and went through background checks.

"Refugees are by far the most vetted immigrants to come to the United States, period," Grigsby says.

Historically, the United States has accepted more refugees than any other nation in the world. But today, that number is unusually low: The U.S. will take in about 45,000 refugees in 2018—a fraction of the more than 200,000 that were accepted in 1980 when the U.S. refugee resettlement program began.

The issue of refugees—and the debate over accepting Syrians in particular—has become heated amid fears of terrorist attacks and a broad backlash against immigration.

After taking office in January 2017,

President Trump issued an executive order temporarily suspending the resettlement of all refugees to the U.S.

so that stricter vetting procedures could be put in place. The bans on refugee resettlement were formally lifted in January, but refugees from 11 countries with histories of terrorism—including Syria—are now required to go through extra screening measures. Trump has said the restrictions are necessary to keep America safe.

Those who support the president's policy worry that terrorists could enter

Refugees have been caught up in a broad backlash against immigration.

*A refugee is someone who is forced to flee their country because of war, persecution, or natural disaster. An immigrant is anyone who chooses to resettle in another country.

the U.S. disguised as refugees and carry out attacks here.

“Syria is in complete disarray, and we don’t have an effective way of looking at people’s backgrounds or even establishing who they are,” says Ira Mehlman of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a group that favors more restrictions on immigration. “[There’s no] guarantee that everyone who’s coming here is entirely innocent.”

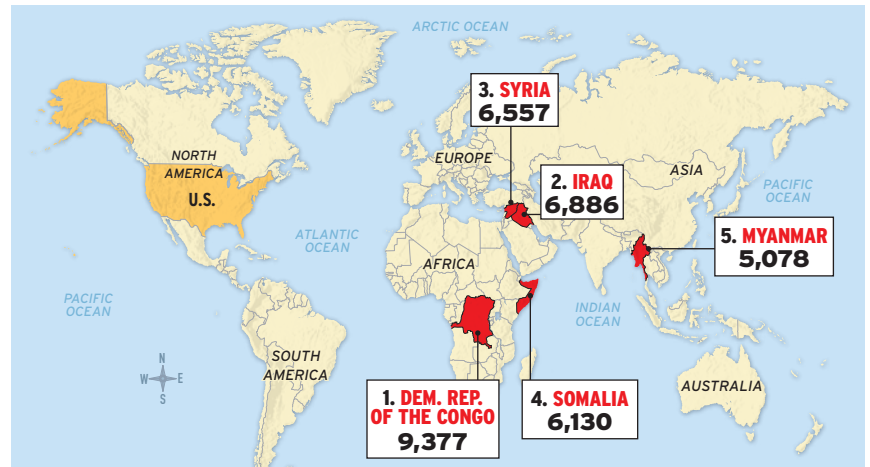
But refugee advocates say the U.S. has a duty to help people in need and that the vetting procedures are already stringent enough. Grigsby points out that refugees who are resettled in the U.S. “are often fleeing the very same terror . . . we are screening them so closely for.”

Several states and civil liberties organizations have sued the Trump administration, claiming the restrictions are unconstitutional. So far, the courts have permitted most of them to remain in place while the legal challenges work their way through the system.

Language Barrier

The Alsaadis arrived in the U.S. in August 2016, five months before Trump’s initial refugee ban. Like all refugees, they were told what city they’d be moving to and given a loan for their travel expenses to the U.S., as well as funding to cover a deposit and a month’s rent. The sparsely furnished three-bedroom apartment the Alsaadis now rent in a housing complex bears little resemblance to the two-story townhouse they left behind in Syria. The house in Damascus was full of furniture and family mementos, and Yaman was

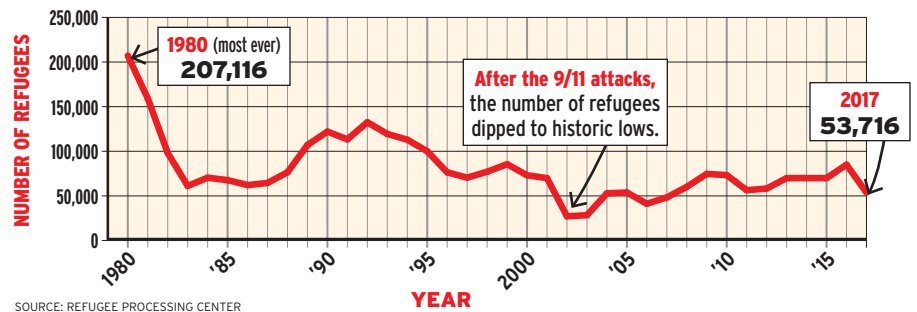
TOP FIVE COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN FOR REFUGEES RESETTLING IN THE U.S. (2017)



STATES WHERE THE MOST REFUGEES WERE RESETTLED (2017)

- | | | | | |
|---------------|----------|-------------|---------------|---------|
| 1. California | 2. Texas | 3. New York | 4. Washington | 5. Ohio |
| 5,160 | 4,768 | 3,098 | 2,923 | 2,867 |

REFUGEES ADMITTED TO U.S. (SINCE 1980)



SOURCE: REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTER

surrounded by neighbors he’d known since he was a child. In Des Moines, he barely knows anyone in his building.

Their living situation is just one of many changes for the family.

As for most refugees, the language barrier has been the hardest adjustment. Yaman’s father had been a lawyer in Damascus, but his limited English has

made it difficult to find a job in America. Yaman himself initially struggled to have conversations even though he had studied English in Syria. Now, more than a year of practicing with friends has helped him become fluent.

“Once you learn the language, the rest of the adjustment is a lot easier,” he says.

His first Iowa winter, a harsh introduction to snow and bitter cold, made him miss Syria’s warmth, but he’s acclimating to his life in other ways. He spends his free time going to the gym or playing soccer with new American friends. He’s also worked part-time as a cashier at Walmart and packing cakes in boxes at the Cheesecake Factory, which helped him develop a taste for classic American dishes.

“Pancakes are really, really good,” he says.

Young Syrians at a refugee camp in Lebanon



JIM MCKAY (MAP); © JOHN OWENS/SOPA VIA ZUMA WIRE (LEBANON)



Hameed & Yasameen Muhammed

started new lives in Houston. Hameed, 18, left school to work full-time to support his family. Yasameen, 17, is thankful to be in a classroom again.

But adjusting to the routines of American life can be tough. Before arriving in the U.S., many refugee children spend years attending makeshift schools in camps or go long stretches without any schooling at all. This can make it hard to catch up once they're resettled.

That's what 17-year-old Yasameen Muhammed, who now lives in Houston, Texas, is struggling with. Yasameen is from a small city in northern Syria. Her family fled in 2012. To escape food shortages and bands of thieves that terrorized their neighborhood, Yasameen, her mother, brother, and five sisters walked for 15 hours from Syria to Iraq, where they spent three years living in a refugee camp before coming to the U.S. The camp lacked many basic facilities, including a decent school.

Struggling to Fit In

Yasameen loved school in Syria, but the initial adjustment to life as a high school sophomore in America was difficult. She wasn't used to social events like homecoming dances and proms, which don't exist in conservative Muslim countries like Syria. In high schools there, public displays of affection between boys and girls are frowned upon, and students dress much more modestly.

When she first arrived in Houston,

students at her school made fun of her for wearing a traditional Muslim head scarf known as a hijab. It made her feel like even more of an outsider.

After more than a year and a half of enduring the stares and whispers, Yasameen stopped wearing the hijab—a decision her family supported.

"Wearing the hijab made me feel too different from everyone else," she says. "Now I fit in better without it, and plus I'm a lot more comfortable in the Texas heat!"

These days, Yasameen is making more friends as her English improves. Above all, she is grateful to be attending school once more.

"Thank God it worked out this way," she says, "because being able to study again means that my siblings and I have a chance to [make something of ourselves]."

For Yasameen and her siblings, becoming refugees meant growing up faster than most teens. Upon arriving in the U.S., refugees receive some financial support from state resettlement agencies to help them get established, but these modest payments are generally limited to eight months. After that, refugees are encouraged to be financially

independent. But balancing financial pressures with the stress of integrating into a new community and learning a new language is hard.

With their mother too ill to work, Yasameen's 18-year-old brother, Hameed, has become the sole provider for their family. He's had to drop out of high school and work full-time in a factory making food storage containers in order to pay his family's bills, but

he's happy to be helping his sisters go to school.

"I don't want to go back to Syria," he says. "Houston is my city now. Here, we have security. We have good people. We have everything."

Back in Des Moines, Yaman Alsaadi is about to start applying to colleges. He thinks he'd like to become an immigration lawyer and give others like him the opportunity to start over.

"A lot of people [from Syria] are just trying to find a place where their kids can go to school, where they can find jobs and homes," he says. Many of them, Yaman believes, are hoping to find the same sense of security that he has found.

"America gives you the opportunity to do what you want to do and be what you want to be," he explains. "It is a good country. I feel like I have a future here." ●

'Wearing the hijab made me feel too different from everyone else.'