Cultural Orientation Resource Center

Refugees from SYRIA

As of October 2014, the three-year conflict in Syria has displaced nearly 9.5 million people, more than 40% of the country's pre-war population. Of these, over 3 million have found temporary asylum in the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Only about 15% of the Syrian refugees live in refugee camps. The rest live outside camps, in cities, towns, and rural areas, often in difficult circumstances and in locations not easily reached by humanitarian aid organizations. The great majority of the refugees are Sunni Muslim Arabs, but the population also includes ethnic and religious minorities, such as Kurds, Druze, and members of various Christian and Shiite Muslim sects.

The influx has stretched to the breaking point the capacity of asylum countries to provide protection and assistance to the refugees. In an effort to relieve the pressure—and enable asylum countries to continue providing sanctuary to Syrians fleeing the war—the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has asked resettlement countries to admit some of the refugees. As of October 2014, 24 countries, primarily in Europe and the Americas, have agreed to resettle Syrians.

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Above: A Syrian refugee family living in Jordan. Photo: UNHCR.

This backgrounder provides resettlement communities with basic information about Syrian refugees. A country profile provides a brief guide to Syria's history, people, and cultures. The backgrounder then looks at the crisis in Syria and the conditions refugees face in first asylum countries. Finally, it considers some of the strengths and resources resettled refugees may be able to draw on in their new communities and some of the challenges they are likely to face.

The backgrounder is intended primarily for those providing initial support and assistance to the newcomers. Others may also find the backgrounder useful. Those who work in local government—health professionals, social workers, and housing officials, among others—may use it to better understand, and thus better serve, their new clients. Teachers may use the backgrounder to educate students about a people whose plight they may have read about or watched on TV. Readers may also include members of the general public interested in learning about their community's newest residents.

Syria Profile

Modern History, Government, and Economy

Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire for 400 years, from the early 1500s to the early 1900s. A period of French colonial rule (1918-1946) ended with Syrian independence. The next 20 years saw multiple coups and a brief unity with Egypt as the United Arab Republic. In 1963, the Ba'ath party took over the government, installing a secular and socialist Arab regime. The new government purged dissenters, nationalized banks, implemented land reform to give land to peasants, and Arabized the educational curriculum.

In 1970, the Minister of Defense, Hafez al-Assad, seized power, and in 1971 made himself president. He created a legislative body, introduced a new constitution, and rigged elections that kept him in power and ensured Ba'ath party dominance. The government cultivated close ties with the USSR, the former Eastern Bloc, and Iran. Syria's consumer needs were met through the development of various production sectors, including agriculture, paper, cloth, and plastics. Higher education, including medical school, was in Arabic, and Syria became a lower middle income country with high levels of literacy, education, and employment. Assad belonged to the Alawite sect of Islam, and his policies favored that sect and assured the allegiance of its members to him. Under the Assad regime, dissent was harshly suppressed.

In 2000, after 30 years of rule, Hafez al-Assad passed away and was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, a British-trained eye doctor who remains in power today. Under Bashar al-Assad, authoritarian rule under one party and one ruler continued. Like his father, Assad favored the Alawite sect politically and economically and placed family members in positions of power. Reforms lifted some of the restrictions on freedom of the press and trade, benefitting a growing urban business elite. Government support for education and health care continued, with health care and higher education provided at little or no cost. Alongside these free government-funded services, private universities and clinics catering to the new elite were founded. Political repression and governmental corruption and mismanagement did not end, however, and most Syrians continued to feel oppressed by the Assad regime and Ba'ath party political control.

The 2011 uprising began as peaceful protests after the government arrested—and reportedly tortured—schoolchildren who had written anti-government graffiti on a wall in Daraa. Perhaps inspired by the success of Arab Spring movements in Egypt and Tunisia, the protestors called for democratic reforms, the lifting of Emergency Law in place since 1963, the release of political prisoners, multiparty elections, and, on the part of some Syrians, the end of the regime. Utilizing informer networks, the Syrian government responded to the demonstrations as it had in the past, with widespread arrests, beatings by plainclothes government forces, brutal interrogations and torture, and the use of live ammunition and snipers to terrify and kill street protestors. The people, however, remained on the streets and began organizing in different ways against the regime. Since the start of the crisis, the Syrian government has referred to protesters and their family members and sympathizers as terrorists.

By June 2011, an estimated 1,400 people had been killed and over 10,000 arrested by the regime. That summer, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed primarily by defectors from the Syrian military, and the fighting to liberate Syria from the Assad regime spread across the country. Islamist fighters joined the uprising. By 2013, over 1,000 individual brigades, loosely organized into frequently changing networks, were fighting the Syrian government. Islamist extremists, including factions based in Iraq, took advantage of the instability and joined in, fighting both the regime and the FSA at different times. One of the foreign factions, the militant Sunni group Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), established a base in eastern Syria. From there it launched an attack and takeover of western Iraq in 2014.

Involvement by outside parties has complicated the Syrian situation. The Syrian government has received economic and military support from Iran, Russia, and Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shi'a Muslim political/military group. Various groups of opposition fighters have received assistance from regional Arab governments, and extremist Islamists have been aided by states and wealthy patrons in the region. The moderate opposition has received some assistance from Europe and the United States.

Civilians and nonviolent activists have paid a heavy toll in the conflict. Since 2011, more than 191,000 people have been killed, and millions driven from their homes. Men, women, and children have suffered extreme trauma or witnessed it. It is estimated that half of Syria's population is no longer

living in their homes, with 6.5 million people internally displaced in Syria, and 3 million registered as refugees in neighboring countries.

Health Care and Education

HEALTH CARE

In pre-conflict Syria, the government emphasized health care, but in a country with a high rate of population growth, funding could not keep up with demand or maintain quality. Access to health care was uneven. For example, in Damascus in 2009, there was one doctor per 339 people, while in rural Al-Hassakah governorate, the ratio was one doctor per 1,906 people, according to the World Health Organization.

The current conflict has shattered the country's health care system, leaving many Syrians with little or no access to basic medical care, including childhood immunizations. By 2013, roughly half of the country's health care facilities had been destroyed or damaged, and most of Syria's health care professionals had fled or been killed or injured. As drug production fell, treatment for both chronic and critical illnesses became scarce, according to the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) 2014. By targeting medical facilities and blocking humanitarian medical aid, the Syrian government has prevented its citizens living in areas under the control of opposition forces from receiving health care.

The country's dwindling mental health care capacity can meet only a tiny fraction of the need. Before 2011, mental health care was in short supply, with only two public psychiatric hospitals and 70 psychiatrists serving a population of 22 million. Today, with more Syrians than ever before in need of care, there are even fewer resources. The one psychiatric hospital still open is located on the outskirts of Damascus, unreachable by those living in areas hardest hit by the conflict.

EDUCATION

In pre-conflict Syria, free public education for all became a government goal. Post-secondary education was highly subsidized in an effort to meet the country's development needs.

Success was mixed. On the one hand, high rates of primary school attendance were achieved for both boys and girls. On the other hand, primary school attendance in rural areas frequently remained far below the national average, and in many places dropout rates were high at the secondary level, especially among girls. At the post-secondary level, government support greatly expanded access to higher education. But for many young Syrians the education they received did not meet labor market needs and as a result did not lead to stable employment–a failure that has fueled much of the youth discontent, according to some Syria experts.

A second major thrust of the government was universal literacy. In the early 1980s, an estimated 42% of the population could not read or write. By the early 2000s, Syria's adult basic literacy rate had risen to over 90% for men and over 77% for women, according to the CIA World Factbook.

The conflict has taken a severe toll on the country's school system. In 2013, UNICEF reported that many schools had been severely damaged or were being used by armed groups and displaced persons seeking shelter. School attendance rates had plummeted–down to 6% in some areas. The report cited insecurity, lack of teachers and resources, and damaged buildings as among the causes of the decline.

The Land

GEOGRAPHY

On the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, Syria is bordered by Turkey on the north, Israel and Lebanon on the west, Iraq on the east, and Jordan on the south. Syria is a medium-sized country, with a diverse geography. The western third of the country and areas of the north and the east are fertile agricultural land, part of an area known since ancient times as "the Fertile Crescent." The Euphrates River flows from Turkey into northeastern Syria and then on to Iraq. The river creates vast areas of fertile farmland, diminished in recent years by Turkish dams and scant rain. Mountain ranges in the west next to Lebanon and in the northwest next to Turkey receive snow in the winter. Southeastern Syria is desert, while the western coastline on the Mediterranean has both beaches and an industrial port.

All of these areas contain many important archaeological and historical sites, from pre-historic settlements (where one of the world's first alphabets was invented) to vast Greco-Roman ruins, early Christian monasteries and churches, Byzantine structures, Crusader castles, and 1,400 years of Islamic-era architecture and infrastructure. The conflict has left its mark on the country's ancient landmarks, however. According to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, five of Syria's six World Heritage Sites have suffered significant damage.

URBAN VS. RURAL

Syrians take great pride in their cities. Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs are the four largest. Each city has a long and storied history; Damascus, the country's capital, has been called the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Each of Syria's major cities is built around an old walled city, with Greco-Roman roads and markets, Jewish synagogues, numerous Christian churches, and some of the world's oldest Muslim mosques. Alongside these ancient structures are private homes and public markets. Outside the walls, the cities expand into suburbs built in European colonial style, and then into modern suburbs, with large apartment buildings, universities, factories, shopping centers, and hospitals.

Syria's rural areas contrast with the wealth of its cities. While rural communities are the country's breadbasket, the Syrian regime in the last 25 years has directed its resources toward urban areas and has not invested in rural development. Government policy, as well as high levels of corruption and cronyism, has alienated rural communities and increased the divide between city and rural dwellers. As a result of government neglect, rural people and migrants from the rural areas generally have lower levels of education. At the same time, because they have had to rely on themselves, rural people have more experience in community organizing.

Government mismanagement during a seven-year drought from 2003 to 2010 forced hundreds of thousands of people to leave their land and move to cities for their survival. This mass migration caused high food prices and unemployment in both rural and urban areas, leading to economic tensions that some allege contributed to the 2011 uprising.

The People

Syria is a culturally diverse country with a pre-conflict population of 22 million people. Its population is relatively well educated, and quite young, with a median age of 22. It is estimated that almost 60% of Syrians lived in urban areas before the fighting caused massive displacement.

EDUCATIONAL AND OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUNDS

Most Syrians have attended at least primary school and have basic literacy skills in Arabic. According to the World Bank, 72% of Syrians of secondary school age were enrolled in school before the uprising. Syrians are known in the Arab world as skilled in construction and other types of manual labor and in the hospitality and service sectors. In pre-conflict Syria, there were many small business owners as well as a professional class made up of doctors, bureaucrats, teachers, university professors, and social workers, among others. Syrians highly value the arts, and the work of its many musicians, writers, artists, and actors has been both promoted and controlled by the government.

ETHNIC, LINGUISTIC, AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Arabs, including Muslims and Christians, make up nearly 90% of Syria's population. Kurds, the second largest ethnic group, make up about 10% of the population. There are other, much smaller ethnic groups, such as the Armenians and the Turkomans. In Syria, ethnic identity and native tongue are closely tied.

All Syrians speak colloquial Arabic, and the great majority can also read and write in Modern Standard Arabic. The Syrian dialect is closest to Lebanese/Palestinian/Jordanian dialects (known as Levantine or *Shami* Arabic), sharing with them a very similar grammar and vocabulary. Kurds from Syria and Syriac Christians speak Arabic as native or near-native speakers and may know how to read and write it. In addition, Kurds may speak Kurdish, and Syriac Christians may speak Syriac. Armenians speak Armenian and are able to speak colloquial Arabic, but may not know how to read and write the language very well. The Turkomans speak a variation of Turkish; they also speak Arabic, but most do not read and write it. Many resettled Syrians will have a basic knowledge of English, but only a small number will be proficient in the language. Some will also speak some French, German, Russian, or another foreign language, depending on their schooling.

Syria has a history of religious tolerance and pluralism and is a much more secular society than many of its Muslim neighbors. Syria's population is 90% Muslim (74% Sunni Muslim and 16% Alawite, Druze, and Ismaili). Christians, comprising 10% of the population, include Arab Christians (Greek Orthodox and Catholic), Syriac Christians, Aramaic-speaking Christians, and Armenian Orthodox and Catholics. There is also a small Kurdish-speaking Yazidi community whose religion has been linked to Zoroastrianism and ancient Mesopotamian religions. A small Arabic-speaking Jewish community left Syria in the 1990s.

Although the war has fueled sectarian tensions, pre-conflict Syrians interacted with members of all religious and ethnic groups at work, at school, and in their neighborhoods.

However, because of governmental preference for Alawites and urban dwellers over the last 30 years, those living in the largely Sunni countryside have felt politically and economically excluded. Kurds and Turkomans are two rural-based minority groups that have been left out of the growth and development of the state. The Kurds have also been neglected because of the government's fear of Kurdish political organizing for independence.

Syria has a long history of accepting immigrants and refugees. Over the past 200 years, refugees, pilgrims, and traders from Afghanistan, China, Iran, Northern Africa, and what are today Somalia and Sudan have become part of Syrian communities. In recent years, Syria has given asylum to large numbers of refugees fleeing turmoil in the region. Since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and the creation of Israel, Syria has hosted more than 500,000 Palestinian refugees in camps in the western part of the country. Palestinians do not have Syrian citizenship, but have most other rights, including the right to education, health care, and employment. After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees fled to Syria, and while many have returned to Iraq and others have fled to Jordan and Turkey, some 28,000 remain in Syria, primarily in Damascus. Syria also took in Lebanese refugees during the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon.

Beliefs and Customs

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Syrians profess the faith they were born into, and conversion to another religion is rare. While religion is a part of a Syrian's identity, it is not necessarily a defining feature. Few Syrians are agnostics and fewer still atheists, yet many feel strongly that religion should be a private matter and separate from the government. Syrians may or may not be devout in their faith: Varying levels of religious belief and practice are accepted, even within the same family. Joining a religious community in the resettlement country may help Syrians adapt, but they may not be comfortable with public expressions of faith outside of prayer.

Devout Muslims in Syria pray five times a day, but do so in private, and they may postpone a prayer if it is not convenient to pray at the scheduled time. Before praying, they will need to cleanse themselves by washing their feet, hands and forearms, and faces. Muslims fast for the lunar month of Ramadan (with no eating, drinking, or smoking from sunup to sundown) as a way to feel empathy for the poor. Ramadan is a time for charity and introspection, when Muslims think about ways to better themselves spiritually. The end of Ramadan is celebrated with prayer and three days of family visits and feasting, called *Eid*. Another important Muslim holiday commemorates the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca (the *hajj*).

Devout Christians in Syria wear crosses around their necks and attend church regularly. Eastern Orthodox Christians also have fast days, including the 40 days of Lent, when they abstain from all animal products (meat, fish, milk, chocolate, butter, and so on), essentially becoming vegans. Unless they are Catholic, Syrian Christians follow the Eastern Orthodox calendar. Catholics celebrate Christmas on December 25, while Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas on January 6 and 7. Western and Eastern churches also differ in their observance of Easter, which is a much more important religious event than Christmas for Syrian Christians.

For both Muslims and Christians, holidays are celebrated not only as religious occasions, but also as family and community affairs. Holidays are a time to visit relatives and neighbors and wish them well—it is not uncommon to make as many as 10 visits in a day. All Muslim and Christian holidays in Syria are official holidays, and thus most Syrians know about these two religions and their traditions.

CUSTOMS

Family and Family Relations

Families are generally large and extended in Syria. They include not only parents and children but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Among family members, there are close bonds of love and support as well as responsibility and supervision. Family members feel a duty to take care of each other and make sure no one does anything that will negatively affect other family members. Family reputation is as important as individual freedom. Improper behavior by women or the failure of men to live up to the code of honesty and generosity can ruin the honor of the family.

In general, Syrian society is patriarchal, and everyone is under the protection and authority of the oldest man. Women are believed to be in need of protection, particularly from the attention of unrelated men. Although older men are the family decision makers, women and younger men engage in a great deal of negotiation and non-confrontational actions to achieve their own goals.

As in other Arab societies, names in Syria reveal family relations. On a document, a child's given name is his or her

first name, and the second name (whether the child is male or female) is the father's first name, while the last name is either the family name or the first name of the grandfather on the father's side. A woman does not take her husband's name in marriage. By Islamic law, any property or wealth that a man or woman brings to a marriage remains in that person's name alone, and does not become joint property.

Gender Roles and Relations

Gender roles in Syria vary according to economic class, family, and urban/rural residency. In general, women cook, clean, and care for children, taking great pride in well-kept homes, pressed clothes, and good food. Men are mainly responsible for working and financially supporting the entire family. Girls help with the housework, and boys may contribute to the family's income by working odd delivery or agricultural jobs, although most children do not work until they finish or quit school. The education of children is seen as important, but children who do not do well in school may drop out to start work or get married.

Among the upper and more educated classes, women work outside the home, and can be found in a wide range of professions, including medicine (at all levels), office work, government service, education, laboratory work, computer science, and social work. Wealthier families support the education and employment goals of both girls and boys, and are likely to hire women from outside the family to help with household chores and childcare.

In middle-class urban and rural households, fewer women work outside the home, particularly if there are young children, as mothers want and are expected to stay home and care for their children. These women generally have lower educational levels and less access to professional or skilled employment. Women in rural areas help out with family work outside the house, in agriculture and subsistence labor, in addition to their household chores. Poor women work in menial, low-wage jobs; such work is generally seen as demeaning and evidence that their husbands and families cannot provide for them. Religiously conservative families (both Muslim and Christian) place more emphasis on women staying home with children as a duty.

More highly educated men and women (whether Muslim, Christian, or non-religious Druze) socialize with one another. Conservative Muslim women from less educated families do not socialize with men outside of their families. In greeting one another, members of the opposite sex are likely to shake hands, although devout Muslim women do not shake hands with unrelated men. Instead, they may nod and put their hands on their hearts.

Regardless of religion or social background, Syrian men and women are quite affectionate with members of the same gender. It is very natural for two Syrian men or women to hold hands, lean on and touch each other, and greet each other with kisses on the cheeks.

Marriage

Syrians tend to marry at a young age, with rural and working-class women generally marrying younger than women who are urban and/or more educated. By law, boys are eligible to marry at 18 and girls are eligible at 17, but the minimum ages can be lowered to 15 for boys and 13 for girls,

Women and Girls Face Special Challenges

Syrian women and girls must grapple with the threat of sexual violence in both Syria and the first asylum countries. Sexual violence and the threat of sexual violence in Syria caused many women and girls to flee the country. Talking about the subject is socially unacceptable, however, and women are unlikely to raise or discuss the issue in front of male family members.

In first asylum countries, the fear of sexual violence from other refugees or host country nationals may cause refugee women and girls to stay home, venturing outside–to go to classes, appointments, or community events–only when accompanied by other family members.

Poverty and fears for the safety of young girls have led some Syrian refugee families to arrange early marriages for their daughters. For example, in 2013, 25% of all marriages by Syrian refugees in Jordan involved a female between the ages of 15 and 17. Many of these marriages have not been registered with local authorities, and some may have ended in divorce. It is possible that a resettled female refugee teenager has been divorced or has a child from an early marriage.

with the approval of a legal guardian. It is not uncommon for men to be 10 to 15 years older than their wives.

In wealthier, more educated families, young women marry shortly after completing university, and men generally marry after they complete their education and have found regular employment. Children live with their parents until they are married, and children who do not marry remain in their parents' home. Before getting married, a young man is expected to be able to support himself and his wife.

While some young men and women choose their partners, most Syrian marriages are arranged by their families and are preceded by a formal engagement. An engagement period allows people to get to know one another before marriage, and sometimes an engagement is even broken. While legal, polygamy appears to be relatively uncommon: In a 2005 survey of 1,891 people, about 9% of urban men and 16% of rural men had more than one wife. Divorce is rare among both Muslims and Christians, but it does happen, and divorced women often receive child support. The religious court decides what happens to the children. In most cases, they stay with the mother until they reach 14 years of age or the mother remarries, at which point they go to live with the father.

Parenting

Syrians parent closely, helping children with schoolwork and monitoring all activities as best they can. Children in pre-conflict Syria were free to run around and play together in their neighborhoods or villages, which were seen as very safe spaces. Traditionally, girls who have passed puberty are less likely to play outside and more likely to stay home or help with chores. If they do go out, they go with other girls or older siblings. Boys often monitor the behavior of their sisters, and older girls and sometimes boys help take care of younger siblings.

Syrians are very affectionate with children—even the children of strangers—and will hold them on their laps, tousle their heads, and kiss the cheeks of babies and children. Children are expected to shake hands when they meet new people and show respect for elders. Corporal punishment is common and accepted, and children will be disciplined with scolding and slaps to the face and hands (but not to the bottom).

Leadership

Without a strong tradition of civil society organizing, pre-conflict Syria did not have many community leaders. Under the two Assad regimes, community organizing was considered a threat to the government. There were Ba'ath party officials whom people feared or worked with as go-betweens with the government, and certain "elders" appointed by the government to represent the community. For help with religious or personal issues, Syrians consulted religious leaders. Charitable organizations, closely monitored by the government, assisted the disadvantaged. It was in these organizations (such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent with its vast network of volunteers) that young people learned organizing skills.

The 2011 uprising saw the emergence of activists, leaders, and community organizers. They have organized under extremely violent conditions, and often underground and in secrecy. The community leaders who have emerged in refugee areas have often been unelected and self-appointed. In many cases, they have risen into positions of leadership through their connections to local landowners, foreign language skills, or opportunism. In pre-2011 Syria, women had the opportunity to become leaders, particularly of charitable organizations and structured groups, but they are likely to be sidelined in the post-2011 environment.

Health Care Beliefs and Practices

PHYSICAL HEALTH CARE. Syrians highly value Western medicine, though their health care beliefs, practices, and preferences reflect their own culture and social realities.

Syrians place great faith and trust in doctors. They often seek immediate medical help for physical ailments and are usually anxious to begin medication as soon as possible. Syrians will answer their health providers' questions, listen carefully to their explanations and advice, and generally follow instructions carefully.

While most Syrians have at least a basic familiarity with Western medicine, attitudes and expectations regarding health care may depart from mainstream Western norms. Here are some common Syrian beliefs, practices, and preferences that may differ from those typically found in resettlement countries:

> Syrians generally prefer to be seen by same-sex health care providers. In rural areas of Syria, women will choose the services of a midwife over those of a male gynecologist.
> Syrians may be embarrassed by personal questions, particularly those having to do with sex. Sexual problems

and sexually transmitted diseases are sensitive issues and should be approached with care.

> For reasons of modesty, female hospital patients usually prefer long hospital gowns.
> During hospital stays, observant Muslims will ask for food that is in accordance with Islamic dietary laws. During Ramadan, patients may refuse to eat or take medication during the day.
> Syrian men and women consider it their responsibility to take care of elderly or ill relatives and members of their community.
> The presence and emotional support of family and friends is extremely important during illness.
> After symptoms disappear, patients often stop taking medication, and may not return for a scheduled follow-up.
> Training to be a nurse is less rigorous in Syria than in Western countries. As a result, Syrians tend to have less confidence in nurses than people in the West have.

MENTAL HEALTH CARE. Syrian attitudes toward mental health treatment have shifted since 2011. Before the crisis, most Syrians viewed mental illness as a stigma that brought shame on the family, and Syrians with mental health needs were usually reluctant to seek professional help or discuss their concerns with family or friends. Today, with large numbers of men, women, and children in obvious psychological distress and need of care, Syrians are more open to seeking mental health treatment.

Food, Drink, and Smoking

For Syrians, eating is an important social activity. Syrians value eating meals with family and friends. Inviting others to share one's food is an essential courtesy; the person invited is expected to decline the invitation the first time, out of politeness. Syrians will always offer a companion some of what they are eating or drinking, and men will always pay for a woman's meal or tea. Men will fight over the check in a café or restaurant, with the oldest or wealthiest person winning, although friends and colleagues take turns paying. It is considered poor manners to divide the check.

Accustomed to a wide variety of grains, meat, fruits and vegetables, Syrians like diversity in their diet. Common Syrian food includes pita bread, *hummus* (chickpea dip), *baba ghanoosh* (eggplant spread), *mahshe* (stuffed grape leaves, zucchini, and bell peppers), *shawarma* (gyro), and salads such as *tabbouleh* and *fattoush*. *Baklava*, made of filo pastry filled with chopped nuts and soaked in honey, is a popular dessert.

Breakfast is usually tea or coffee with pita bread and either cheese, eggs, hummus, or yogurt and maybe jam and olives. Lunch, eaten around 2:00 to 3:00 p.m., is generally the largest meal of the day. It is often a cooked stew, ideally with meat or chicken and vegetables, commonly served with rice and eaten with pita bread and salads. Dinner is usually late and similar to breakfast.

Religious strictures impose dietary restrictions. Muslim Syrians will not eat pork, and observant Muslims will not drink alcohol and may not eat shellfish. Alcohol is consumed by more secular Muslims and by Christians and non-religious Druze. Everyone drinks cups of tea and coffee throughout the day, served with lots of sugar. Smoking is common, including indoors in homes, offices, and restaurants. In Syria, women do not smoke in public, but might do so at home or in places where there are no men present, such as public bathrooms.

Clothing

Syrians, regardless of background, tend to dress modestly in public. Shorts, for example, are never worn outside the home, except by men when playing sports or at the beach.

That said, in clothing, as in other things, there is an urban-rural divide, with women in the cities likely to wear dresses, jeans, and other Western clothes. Pre-2011, most Syrian women and girls did not wear headscarves, but there has been an increase in religious dress since 2011.

A devout Muslim woman will cover her legs, arms, and torso up to her collarbone and may wear a headscarf. Most Muslim women over 65 also wear a headscarf, as a sign of age, if not belief. Christian women wear a light cover on their heads in church.

Conditions in First-Asylum Countries

As of August 2014, 3 million Syrian refugees have been registered in the first-asylum countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Conditions vary greatly, both by country and within countries. Although much of the international attention and resources has been directed at refugees who are living in camps, 85% of the region's Syrian refugees reside outside camps. Locations are diverse,

spanning major cities, provincial towns, sprawling suburbs, and rural areas.

Camps for Syrian refugees exist in three countries: Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. While all camps generally meet international standards, conditions differ considerably. Refugees who live outside of camps often lack access to adequate shelter, clean water, health care, schools, and income-generating opportunities.

The following is a country-by-country summary of the conditions refugees in the region face.

An informal settlement in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Photo: UNHCR

Lebanon

Lebanon, the smallest of the first-asylum countries, hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees. With a population of 4 million people, Lebanon has allowed more than 35% of the region's 3 million Syrian refugees to cross into Lebanon (increasing its own population by 25%). The influx has exerted enormous pressure on the economy and public services, and caused an alarming rise in tensions between Lebanese and refugees as the two groups compete for jobs and local resources.

Until recently many Syrians faced an uncertain future in Lebanon, but a new policy permits Syrians who entered the country illegally or overstayed their legal stay to settle their residency status. For Syrian Kurds and Palestinians, however, the situation remains precarious. Kurds enter Lebanon as stateless persons without any Syrian identification or identity documents and are thus forced to live in the country illegally. Some Palestinians from Syria have been turned back at the border or forcibly returned to Syria.

Lebanon has no refugee camps for Syrians. Refugees are dispersed throughout the country across 1,700 localities. Adequate shelter remains the greatest challenge in the humanitarian response, with refugees living in overcrowded apartments or houses, abandoned buildings and, increasingly, in informal tented settlements. Access to health care and clean water and sanitation is also a challenge.

Other concerns relate to employment and education. The influx has had a significant impact on the local economy, raising prices and making it difficult for both Lebanese and refugees to find gainful employment. In Beirut, men work at odd jobs, mainly as residential building caretakers and street vendors. Syrian children are allowed to attend Lebanese schools, but due to overcrowding fewer than 100,000 of the nearly 400,000 refugee children are able to enroll. UNICEF and its partners have launched informal educational activities for out-of-school refugee children, but hundreds of thousands still do not have access to education. These out-of-school children are vulnerable to exploitation, such as child labor and early marriage.

Turkey

According to Turkish government figures in mid-August 2014, more than 217,000 Syrians were living in 22 tent or container camps in 10 provinces. These camps are reported to be safe and in good condition, with adequate housing, food, water, laundry and cooking facilities, and health services. Children attend camp schools, which follow the Syrian curriculum and provide instruction in Arabic and Turkish.

However, the majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey live outside the camps, and for these refugees conditions are difficult. According to unofficial estimates, 200,000 refugees are in Istanbul, 200,000 in Gaziantep, and 100,000 in Izmir, living in overcrowded conditions with extremely poor facilities. As UNHCR is not the lead actor in providing assistance in Turkey, lack of information about services available to refugees is a common challenge for Syrians who often do not know how or where to register for such services. For example, although Turkish hospitals have been directed by the government to provide free health care to registered Syrians, NGO fieldworkers report that hospitals either do not know about the policy or ignore it. Instead, hospitals often charge refugees the same rate that they charge foreign visitors for their services.

The cost of living in Turkey is much higher than in Syria, and to make ends meet adults and children often work or beg in the streets. Most children are not permitted to attend Turkish schools. Some enroll in schools set up by the Syrian community or funded by UNICEF, but the UN agency

estimates that 73% of school-age children are not enrolled in school.

Kurdish refugees in Istanbul are said to face especially difficult conditions. Unemployment among the Syrian Kurds is high, and access to health care is spotty at best. Employed refugees work long hours for little pay, mostly in textile workshops, catering, and construction.

Jordan

Jordan has five official Syrian refugee camps, in the northern governorates of Jordan near the border with Syria. For every one Syrian in a refugee camp, however, another four live outside a camp.

The largest camps in Jordan are Za'atri, housing approximately 80,000 refugees, and Azraq, housing between 8,000 and 13,000. One additional camp and two small converted transit centers house an additional 5,000 refugees. Health care is available in clinics and hospitals in the largest camps. With hot, dry, and dusty conditions in the summer and heavy rains in winter, humanitarian agencies have struggled to make the camps habitable. One challenge has been providing adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities. In the congested Za'atri camp, WASH challenges include the cost of trucking water into the camp and removing waste, tension between Syrians and the surrounding Jordanian community over public water usage, and the failure to meet refugees' WASH needs or take into account their practices.

For the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Jordan living outside camps, conditions are increasingly difficult, according to a joint UNHCR and International Relief and Development survey. The survey highlights the daily struggle for survival of some 500,000 registered urban Syrian refugees as they face rising prices and substandard and overcrowded housing. Refugees working without permission risk being exploited by employers, being deported to Syria, or forced to live in a refugee camp. Low school attendance, due to transportation challenges, bullying, and overcrowded classrooms, is also an issue.

Syrian Palestinians in Jordan are particularly vulnerable. According to an August 2014 report by Human Rights Watch, Jordan has officially banned entry to Palestinians from Syria since January 2013 and has forcibly deported more than 100 Palestinian men, women, and children who managed to enter the country since mid-2012.

Iraq

Iraq is not only receiving large numbers of Syrian refugees, but over the last three years it has seen the return of many Iraqi refugees who had previously found asylum in Syria. Most of the Syrian refugees are Kurds who have relocated to Iraqi Kurdistan in northern Iraq. Smaller numbers of Syrian refugees reside in Anbar province in the west and in other provinces.

Almost half of the Syrian refugees in Iraq live in 12 refugee camps across three governorates. Iraqi Kurdistan's autonomous government gives Syrians residency permits that also allow them to work. The permits allow for freedom of movement in Iraqi Kurdistan, and all refugees, whether they live in or out of camps, can move and seek work without restriction.

Domiz is the largest refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan, with close to 80,000 refugees registered as residents. The development of the camp over the last three years has been uneven. In older, more established parts of the camp, there are streets lined with shops, cafés, and restaurants. In transit and new areas, there are makeshift informal tented areas and few sanitation services. A survey of camp residents revealed a mixed picture. A little over half of the residents interviewed felt the camp was safe and nearly two-thirds said they were able to access medical services. Only one-third of the respondents were gainfully employed.

Non-camp refugees live mostly in urban centers with little access to humanitarian assistance. Their residency permits entitle them to free medical and educational services, but the Kurdistan Regional Government health and education infrastructure has been overwhelmed by the needs of the Syrians and of the newly displaced Iraqis. A 2014 report by the Turkish think tank ORSAM notes three issues of concern among non-camp refugees: unsafe housing, high rents, and low school attendance by children, who must work to contribute to their family's income. The report also points out that while public attitudes toward the refugees remain mostly positive, local resentment is rising, particularly among the poor, who claim the Syrians are depriving them of jobs, burdening the school and health care systems, and causing higher rents.

Egypt

Egypt hosts an estimated 300,000 Syrians, of whom some 140,000 have registered as refugees with UNHCR. Egypt has no refugee camps for Syrians. Refugees are scattered in urban

neighborhoods, renting and sharing accommodations. Syrian refugees generally have access to Egyptian public health and education services, but they face discrimination in accessing these services. According to UNHCR, more than 68% of Syrian children are not receiving formal education, although some attend informal schools run by the Syrian community. Syrians in Egypt, like many Egyptians, face difficult living conditions, including rising prices, scarce work opportunities, and safety concerns due to political instability. Egyptian authorities often view Syrians with suspicion, and have occasionally detained and deported Syrians and Palestinians from Syria caught without proper documentation.

The smuggling of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers from North Africa to Europe is a growing protection concern. An increasing number of Syrian refugees are entering Europe illegally from Egypt and Libya, risking their lives in dangerous boat trips across the Mediterranean. According to UNHCR, more than 21,000 Syrian refugees were smuggled into southern Italy in 2013 from North Africa and the Middle East.

Implications for Resettlement

Strengths and Resources

Resettled Syrian refugees will find they have strengths and resources they can draw on in their new communities. With a long history of migrating to other countries in search of better lives, Syrians are known for their hard work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit. This spirit can be seen in first-asylum countries. In Jordan's Za'atri Camp, for example, refugee-owned businesses line the main street, and in southeast Turkey, small Syrian shops have sprung up throughout major cities.

Established Syrian and other Arab communities in resettlement countries will most likely be a source of comfort and support for Syrian newcomers. There is an organized and well-resourced Syrian-American community in the United States, and many of its members have been very active in raising money and working to provide humanitarian assistance inside Syria. In countries that have resettled Iraqi refugees, Syrian newcomers may be able to draw upon the support of a group with whom they share not only a common language and culture but also a similar history of hardship.

Educational levels will vary greatly among Syrian newcomers, but it is expected that most adults will arrive in their new communities with at least some elementary school education and a basic ability to read and write their own language. Many will also bring useful social media skills. Syrians under the age of 30 tend to be very technology savvy, using social media applications to communicate with friends and family, share information, and organize activities. Even older Syrians have a basic knowledge of email and Skype. These skills will help newcomers adjust to the widespread use of computers in Western countries, as well as facilitate community-building post-resettlement.

Initial Resettlement Issues and Needs

CASEWORKERS AND INTERPRETERS

In pairing a refugee with a caseworker, gender is likely to be more important than ethnicity and language background. This is particularly true for women, who will usually prefer a female caseworker.

If a Syrian interpreter is not available, then a non-Syrian Arabic speaker (such as an Iraqi or Palestinian) can be used. As with caseworkers, an interpreter who is the same gender as the refugee is generally preferable, particularly in health care situations.

For Kurdish refugees, an Arabic or Kurdish language interpreter can be used. A Kurdish-speaking interpreter will need to know the same dialect of Kurdish (either Kurmanji or Sorani) spoken by the refugee.

EMPLOYMENT, LANGUAGE STUDY, AND EDUCATION

Many Syrians will be eager to work as soon as possible. Those with backgrounds in white-collar occupations may be reluctant to accept manual labor jobs, however. A job placement that considers a person's background—for example, by placing a former government worker in a cashier rather than a janitorial position—is more likely to succeed. Professionally trained Syrians will be eager to return to their professions and should be told as soon as possible about any recertification process.

Language classes will be a high priority for Syrians, since most will arrive with little or no proficiency in the language of the resettlement country. Those who have studied a Roman alphabet-based language (for example, French or German) will learn to read and write another Roman alphabet-based language, such as English or Swedish, more easily than those who can read and write only Arabic.

Most children will arrive with little or no ability to speak, read, or write English or any other Western language. Some will have very limited previous schooling, and will need special support in subject matter areas as well as in the language of instruction.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The refugee population includes men, women, and children who have suffered torture and violence, including sexual violence. Mental health care providers working in Jordan report high rates of children, some age five or younger, who have experienced torture or trauma–higher levels than previously seen in Middle East refugee populations. Almost every Syrian refugee will have lost family or friends in the war.

Studies of refugee populations indicate high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly among children and adolescents. Survivors of trauma should be identified as soon as possible so that culturally sensitive support can be provided. As already noted, Syrians seem to have become less opposed to mental health treatment since the conflict. Stigmas persist, however, and resettled Syrian refugees who need psychosocial support may not openly request it. Female refugees may not want to talk about sexual abuse in front of their families; many may reveal abuse in a healthcare setting. Some Syrians may have received only drug therapy and may be unfamiliar with other forms of treatment.

For treatment to succeed, respecting confidentiality and building trust will be critically important. Syrians are likely to prefer individual over group therapy, where such support is available. An Arabic-speaking social worker who is the same gender as the patient can be extremely helpful in building a trusting therapist-patient relationship. A former United Nations official who managed psychosocial projects for displaced Syrians suggests that therapists break the ice with a statement of empathy, such as: "We know what a terrible situation it was over there and how much you went through. We are here to help you feel better and start a new, healthy life."

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Resettled refugees may experience feelings of isolation in their new communities. For groups, such as the Syrians, who are not used to spending long periods of time alone, social isolation can be an unfamiliar and unsettling challenge. Community centers and events that bring refugees together can lessen the sense of loneliness. Housing placements that are near Arab-speaking communities can also reduce isolation as well as provide opportunities to share information and coping strategies.

CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES

Resettled Syrians will find much to like and admire in their new communities. In the United States, for example, they will appreciate American values of social justice, freedom, equality, and hard work. At the same time, they will encounter a culture that is very different from their own in many ways. The following briefly discusses some cultural differences that may cause confusion and conflict.

RELATIONS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN. The open and friendly relations between men and women in resettlement countries will be a source of confusion and discomfort for Syrians. Newcomers will need to understand that while relations between men and women may appear easy and relaxed, there are customs and in some countries laws governing acceptable behavior and speech, particularly in the workplace.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. Domestic violence is not illegal in Syria, where victims of spousal abuse have very limited legal recourse. Due to the extraordinary pressures of life in Syria and in countries of first asylum, domestic violence may have occurred in families, either between spouses or between parents and children. Refugees will need to understand domestic violence laws in their new communities and resources available to them.

POLYGAMY. Although polygamy does not appear to be widely practiced in Syria, it is legal. Syrians will need to understand laws regarding polygamy in countries where they are resettled.

SAME-SEX RELATIONS. Syrian men and women show public affection for members of the same gender. For example, men hold hands and greet one another with kisses on the cheeks. This behavior should not be understood to indicate sexual orientation. Syrians will need to understand Western attitudes and norms regarding displays of affection between members of the same gender.

Among Syrians, there is a general stigma against gays and openly gay behavior. LGBTI individuals are likely to keep their sexuality very private.

PARENTING. Syrian parents often do not provide the same level of adult supervision that is the norm (and in some cases, the law) in many Western countries today. It is also customary in Syria to discipline children physically. Syrians will need to understand the laws and customs regarding neglect and abuse in their new communities.

SHOWING AFFECTION FOR OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN. In Syria, it is considered completely normal for someone to walk up to a stranger's child, pick her up, kiss her on the cheek and give her candy, and exclaim how cute she is. Syrians will need to know that in other countries this behavior may be considered extremely inappropriate.

COMMUNICATION STYLE. Syrians may communicate in a more intense way than is the norm in the resettlement country. They may stand closer to one another when they talk, speak in louder voices, and use more gestures. Those not used to this communication style may think that two Syrians are in a heated argument when in fact they are simply having a normal conversation.

Syrians exchange more niceties in conversations than may be common in resettlement countries. It is an everyday courtesy to inquire about another's health, even when the people are not well acquainted.

HEALTH CARE PRACTICES. Syrians are used to medical care that reflects their religious and cultural preferences. Medical treatment is more likely to be effective when health professionals provide culturally sensitive care, such as same-sex health care providers, long gowns that cover lower legs, and hospital food that follows Islamic dietary laws. It is essential that reproductive health care be provided to refugee women by female gynecologists and nurses.

SMOKING. In Syria, smoking is common, including indoors in homes, offices, and restaurants. Syrians will need to understand local laws, expectations, and etiquette regarding smoking in public places, at home, and in other people's homes.

CLOTHING. Syrian women generally dress much more conservatively than Western women, and many Muslim women use a headscarf to cover their hair. Syrians will be taken aback by the casual—and by Syrian standards, revealing-clothing styles of Western women, particularly in summer.

While Syrians often wear the same clothes two or three days in a row, they tend to wear only their nicest clothes in public, and the clothes are always clean and neatly pressed. Newly resettled refugees will want access to an iron and ironing board.

RESTAURANT BILL ETIQUETTE. Syrians do not divide up a check in a restaurant. Instead, one person—usually the oldest or wealthiest male—pays the entire check. Syrians will need to understand the custom of splitting the bill in countries where that practice is common.

Syrian Refugees' Views of the Situation Back Home

Resettled Syrian refugees will be of different minds about the political situation back home. All will agree that the fighting has devastated Syria and come at an unacceptable cost to ordinary people. Beyond that, three views—pro-Assad, anti-Assad, and ambivalent—are likely to be found among the refugees. Pro-Assad Syrians will support Assad either out of conviction, shared identity, or fear for family members still in Syria. The anti-Assad group will include those who believe in political freedoms and/or abhor the brutality of the regime. The third group, those who are ambivalent, will be made up of Syrians who were anti-Assad in the past but are now uncertain about the regime because of the rise of Islamist extremism and the destruction of Syria. These Syrians may feel that however bad life in Syria was under Assad, things are worse now.

The political views that resettled Syrians bring with them may spark intense discussion and friction among some. Other Syrians may have been conditioned by the crisis to keep their political views private. Those working with Syrians should respect people's views and not probe or share them with others.

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