

CULTURAL BACKGROUNDER

REFUGEES FROM SYRIA



INTRODUCTION

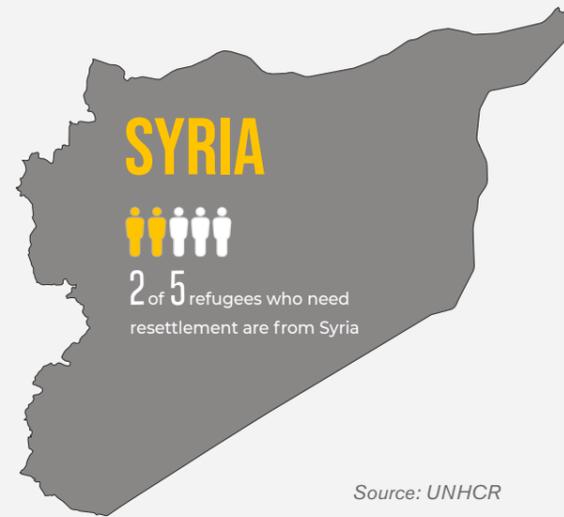
From 2017–2019, 40,010 refugees from Syria arrived in EU-27 countries through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettlement programme, with the largest numbers of people resettling in Germany, France and Sweden.¹ Another 287,630 people filed asylum applications to EU-27 countries in the same period.²

Need for Resettlement

When the authoritarian president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, died in 2000, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad.³ Like his father, Bashar al-Assad repressed opposition political parties, ensuring that he and his family, members of the Alawite Muslim minority, remained in power. There was also significant corruption and mismanagement of resources, ultimately leading to peaceful protests in 2011.³ In response to these protests, the Syrian government, led by Assad, used violent force. The police, military, and paramilitary forces used live ammunition against protestors and beat people in the streets. Those arrested (an estimated 10,000 people by June 2011) were interrogated and some tortured.³ Another estimated 1,400 people were killed.³ This sparked a civil war that continues today. As of March 2020, 586,100 people were estimated to have been killed during the conflict.⁴

Assad has been supported by the Syrian army, pro-government militias, Iran, and Russia.⁵ The Free Syrian Army, comprised primarily of defectors from the Syrian military and backed at various times by the United States and the United Kingdom, formed to liberate Syria from Assad's control,⁵ and have been joined by allied forces from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf.⁵ Al-Qaeda (who has severed ties with the Islamic state) and its allies are also fighting Assad.⁵ In March 2013, the Islamic State, seizing upon the instability, invaded Syria and took control of one third of the country, claiming the northern city of Raqqa as their capital.⁵ While the Islamic State has since lost much of this territory, they remain a significant force in Syria.⁶ Fighting the Islamic State has been the Kurds, Syrian Democratic Forces (a coalition led by the U.S.), Saudi Arabia and its allies, Syria, and Russia.⁵

According to UNHCR, as of July 2020 there were over 6,000,000 internally displaced people within Syria.⁷ Another 5,544,395 people were registered as refugees, of which 3.5 million people were registered in Turkey; 2 million were registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon; and more than 33,000 were registered in North Africa.⁸ UNHCR estimates that 40% of the world's 1.4 million refugees in need of resettlement are from Syria.⁹



Asylum Country Conditions

Of those refugees registered with UNHCR, as of July 2020, just 5% (284,614) lived in camps, while the other 95% (5,259,040) lived in urban, peri-urban, or rural areas.⁸ The following is a summary of conditions in the three countries which host the largest number of Syrian refugees — Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.⁸

Turkey

In 2020, the largest number of refugees from Syria (3.7 million) was registered under temporary protection status in Turkey.¹⁰ Syrians in Turkey are allowed to access certain public services, but do not have freedom of movement and are required to remain in the province in which they were registered.¹¹ The vast majority of Syrians, over 98%, live outside of the country's seven Temporary Accommodation Centres (TACs) in both rural and urban areas.¹⁰ The cost of living is high and employed refugees often work long hours for low wages.³ This gap between income and expenses has resulted in many Syrians living in substandard shelters,¹⁰ and both adults and children begging in the streets.³ Syrian children are eligible for free education.¹¹ Whilst Syrian children are eligible for free education, and 90% of those residing in TACs are registered in education centres, a majority of children outside of the TACs do not attend school.¹¹ This is especially true for older children who likely have already experienced gaps in education and who work in order to support their families.

Lebanon

According to UNHCR, as of June 2020, 884,266 registered refugees from Syria live in Lebanon,⁸ a country of 4.5 million people.¹² This makes it the largest concentration of refugees per capita in the world.¹³ There are no formal camps in the country. Instead, refugees reside in apartments and houses that are full beyond capacity, in buildings that have been abandoned, and in informal tent settlements throughout more than 1,700 locations within the country.¹³ Syrian refugees continue to face challenges with obtaining legal residency in Lebanon. In fact, in 2019, only 22% of individuals aged 15 and above reported having legal residency.¹³ Without this, they are at risk of harassment, arrest, and detention, and are unable to legally work or access basic services.¹³ This is a concern as more than half of Syrian households have less than what is required to meet basic needs.¹⁴ In 2015/16, approximately 42% of eligible Syrian children were enrolled in public education. Barriers to participation for those not enrolled include child labour, early marriage, and lack of familiarity with English and French when these are used as the language of instruction.¹⁴

Jordan

According to UNHCR, as of July 2020, approximately 658,028 refugees from Syria were registered in Jordan.⁸ Jordan's camps are hot and dusty in the summer and excessively wet in the winter, making water, sanitation, and hygiene services difficult to manage.⁴ The camps are heavily patrolled by the Jordanian government and refugees living there are unable to come and go as they please.¹⁵ For the remaining 80% of refugees from Syria who reside outside of the camps, conditions are also difficult. With 85% of the country living below the poverty line and work permits issued only to non-Jordanians employed in certain professions in special economic zones, it is a challenge to earn a living wage.¹⁶ One bi-product of this has been overcrowded housing. In a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University, the World Health Organization, the Kingdom of Jordan, and UNHCR in 2014, five or more people were sleeping per room in 25.1% of the households observed.¹⁷ Throughout the country, basic education is free and mandatory.¹¹ However, refugee children face numerous barriers to attendance, including a lack of access to transportation, fear of harassment, post-traumatic stress disorder, and lack of financial resources for school supplies and other necessities.¹¹

Culture

Language

The official language of Syria is Arabic, with Modern Standard Arabic recognised as the language of the education system.³ There are an estimated 17 dialects spoken in the country;¹⁸ the most widely used of these is the Syrian dialect, which closely resembles Levantine or Shami Arabic, spoken by those in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan.³ Other languages spoken in Syria include Kurdish, spoken by approximately 6% of the population; Aramaic; and Assyrian, spoken by 4–5% of the population.¹⁸ The most commonly understood foreign languages are English and French.¹⁸

Gender Roles

Syrian society tends to be patriarchal,³ with men maintaining authority in many aspects of day-to-day life. They are the primary wage earners and are seen as responsible for the protection of those in their household.³ Syrian women, particularly those in more rural areas, tend to work inside the home, cleaning, caring for the children, and preparing meals. While there has been a shift in gender roles and responsibilities in recent years, with women assuming more work outside the home, a 2016 study by CARE found that many still believe that this work should be "suitable" for women, i.e., aligned with more traditional roles such as sewing, cooking, and cleaning, able to be done from the woman's home, or accomplished during hours when she would not need to be available to support her family.²²

Religion

According to the CIA World Factbook, 87% of Syrians are Muslim, of which 74% are Sunni, and the remaining 13% are Shia, Alawite, and Ismaili.¹⁹ Christians comprise an estimated 10% of the population,¹⁹ and the Druze comprise 3%, with a small number of Jews residing principally in Aleppo and Damascus.¹⁹ The Syrian constitution guarantees freedom of religion,²⁰ and the holidays of both Muslims and Christians are recognized.²¹

Food, Drink, and Smoking

Popular Syrian dishes include *hummus*, a spread made of chickpeas; *baba ghanoush*, a spread made of eggplant; *pita bread*; *mahshe*, vegetables such as courgettes and bell peppers stuffed with rice, meat or other vegetables; *shawarma*, thinly sliced meat, most typically lamb or mutton, stacked and roasted; salads such as *tabbouleh* and *fattoush*; and *baklava*, a flaky pastry filled chopped nuts and soaked in honey.³ Muslim Syrians do not consume pork and will likely not eat shellfish.³ Tea is frequently consumed with meals and on its own throughout the day.³ Alcohol is legal in Syria, and arak, a liquor distilled from grape vines, is popular; however, consumption is far less common amongst Muslim Syrians as its use is prohibited by the Quran. Smoking is widespread among Syrian men, including Muslim Syrian men, and often done indoors; smoking shisha from a hookah is popular with both women and men and is often carried out in public spaces.

Health Considerations

As noted by the World Health Organisation (WHO),³⁰ the health system in Syria was one of the best in the Middle East before the start of the conflict. The country currently suffers from very low vaccination rates and malnutrition in some areas; alongside disruptions to water and sanitation systems, this means disease outbreaks are more common and dangerous.

Additionally, WHO estimated in 2019 that one in thirty people in Syria is experiencing a severe mental health condition, whilst one in five people is experiencing a mild to moderate mental health condition. Although mental illness has traditionally carried some stigma, since the start of the conflict, attitudes have shifted, and Syrians have been more willing to seek professional care.³ Unfortunately, while Syrians may be more willing to seek care, the care available in Syria and some countries of asylum may be inadequate,²⁴ as systems rely heavily on international nongovernmental organisations operating on limited budgets.

Urban and Rural Communities

Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs are Syria's four largest cities.³ Each is walled and includes traditional markets, homes, and Jewish, Christian and Muslim houses of worship.³ Outside the city walls, there are universities, hospitals, shopping centres, and apartment complexes.³ The majority of the country's resources have been directed to these cities, and as a result, people living in more rural areas tend to be poorer and have fewer opportunities to access education.³



Resettlement Considerations

Average Case Size

According to UNHCR, 54% of refugees from Syria who were resettled to EU-27 countries during the years 2017–2019 were boys (29%) and girls (25%) aged 17 and under; followed by men and women (22% respectively) aged between 18 and 59; and men and women (1% respectively) 60 or over.²³

Work Experience and Vocational Training

Prior to the civil war, Syria was classified by the World Bank as a lower-middle income nation, with a relatively stable middle class.²⁴ Many Syrians worked as small business owners, doctors, university professors, and social workers.³ A number also served in the construction, hospitality and service industries and were known by those in the Middle East as being highly skilled in these areas.³ Approximately 17% of the labour force works in the agricultural sector.¹⁹ Syrian newcomers who have been professionally trained will be eager to return to their respective fields and will benefit from learning about recertification criteria

soon upon arrival to the receiving community, and the possibilities of accepting early employment as they work towards recertification.³ Syrian women may benefit from gender-segregated sessions on employment where they can discuss any concerns they might have about entering the workforce, and should be supported to understand their rights regarding the wearing of religious symbols such as a hijab at work.

Education and Literacy

According to the CIA World Factbook, the average school life expectancy in Syria is 9 years.¹⁹ It is estimated that about 2 million children are out of school²⁵ due to a variety of reasons including security concerns, damaged school buildings, and a limited number of educators and supplies. Those who do attend school face overcrowded classrooms and possible exposure to traumatic experiences.²⁵ In 2015, the literacy rate for adults aged 15 and over was estimated to be 86.4%, with 91.7% of men and 81% of women able to read and write.¹⁹

Physical and Mental Health

The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention has identified that anemia, diabetes, hypertension and mental illness are all priority conditions that refugees from Syria commonly suffer from.²⁴ According to 2014 outpatient records from International Medical Corps-supported clinics, the most common mental health diagnoses of Syrians in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan were severe emotional disorders including anxiety and depression (54%).²⁶ Syrians trust medical services and will seek care when needed.³ They are familiar with medical practices which are common in the West;³ however, they may need support in understanding that appointments with a medical practitioner may be brief. The care provided to Syrians will be most effective when it is culturally sensitive, which may mean providing patients with healthcare staff of the same gender; the provision of longer hospital gowns; and meals that are in accordance with religious dietary restrictions.³



Social Greetings

In informal settings, Syrians may greet one another with a hug or a kiss on either cheek. In formal settings, Syrians may shake hands gently. Syrian women will demonstrate that they are comfortable with shaking someone's hand if they outstretch their hand first²¹, and both women and men will put their hand up to their chest when greeting someone of the opposite gender to indicate they are not comfortable with shaking hands.

Parenting

Prior to the war, it was not uncommon for parents to allow their children to play unsupervised in their local neighborhood as they knew that other adults would provide oversight.²⁹ Understanding this, service providers in the receiving community may wish to provide Syrian newcomers with information about how laws relating to child supervision in their receiving communities may differ. As physical discipline is considered acceptable in Syria,²⁹ information about how receiving community laws relating to physical discipline may differ can also be covered. Should men who are unaccustomed to looking after their children full-time remain at home with the children as their wives enter the workforce, they may also

benefit from learning about different child rearing techniques.

Domestic Violence

In a 2005 study funded by the United Nations Development Fund for Women, it was revealed that between 10 and 25 percent of Syrian women had endured physical violence in the home,²⁷ and in 2018, Syrian refugee women reported an increase in domestic violence incidents since the start of the crisis, citing the conflict and the resulting displacement, shifting gender roles, and poor living conditions, as stressors.²⁸ While resettlement can ease some of the stressors experienced by refugees, it can also contribute to them. To address this, it is recommended that service providers ensure Syrian newcomers are connected to existing community resources available to support them, are aware of local laws regarding domestic violence, and understand what will occur when domestic violence is reported.

Caseworkers and Interpretation

In assigning caseworkers and interpreters to refugees from Syria, gender is an important factor to be considered.³ Syrian women will likely feel more comfortable working with another woman, particularly when

accessing health services.³ With regards to the use of interpreters, if a Syrian interpreter cannot be secured, a non-Syrian Arabic speaker may be used.³ For those of Kurdish ethnicity, an Arabic or Kurdish interpreter might be used; however, it is important that the Kurdish interpreter speaks the Kurmanji or Sorani dialect used by the refugee.³

Resources

Practitioners should ensure that interpreters are properly trained. EURITA has developed a number of resources to support you in this training, including a Trainer's Manual and Participant Workbook which you can find at ritaresources.org. To support U.S. practitioners in working with those affected by conflict, IRC developed the IRC Mental Health and Wellness: U.S. Programs. You can also access this through the RITA website at ritaresources.org.

NOTE:

This backgrounder contains historical, political, and cultural information, as well as resettlement considerations, intended to support practitioners in facilitating the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Europe. While generalizations regarding the populations may be reported by practitioners, it is important to remember that every individual is unique and should be treated as such.



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