

This is my Syria ...

Reflections from Syrian Refugees making the Thompson Okanagan their home.

Syria is

culturally rich and diverse in its history. The families sharing their reflections all comment on how calm and safe it was before the conflict broke out and how beautiful Syria was. Their perspectives

and voices are what is largely being shared here, with a brief overview of the background only for context. While the families are happy to find peace in Canada, their journeys here all began with the difficult decision to flee their homes, often leaving extended family members, jobs and their possessions, in fear for their and their children's safety. They have sacrificed much, but are resilient survivors, who are making the best of starting anew in Canada.



The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus is one of the oldest mosques in the world. It is one of the national landmarks missed by Syrians now living in Canada. www.islamiclandmarks.com

Background

After 400 years as part of the Ottoman Empire and a brief stint as a French colony (1918-1946), Syria gained independence in 1946 and suffered a series of coups over the next 20 years. In 1963, the Ba'ath party took over and installed a secular and socialist Arab regime that purged dissenters, nationalized banks and implemented land reforms to give land to peasants. In 1970, then Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad, seized power and ruled for the next 30 years, enforcing Emergency Laws and harshly suppressing any dissension. Upon Hafez al-Assad's death, his son Bashar al-Assad, took over and remains President today.¹

Under the Assad regime, Syria improved its education and health care access for citizens, however people were also feeling oppressed and seeing government corruption and mismanagement. The Assad regime favoured the Alawite Muslims politically and economically, while the majority of the country identified as Sunni Muslims, with Christians comprising about 10% of the population. In March 2011 the uprising began with peaceful protests after a crackdown on anti-government graffiti in the city of Deraa. The Assad regime's security forces were sent in to deal with the dissenters, who were now calling for democratic reforms, the release of prisoners, multiparty elections and for some Syrians, the end of the Assad regime. The conflict quickly descended into full civil war, with innocent civilians caught in the middle.²

The UN estimated that 90,000 people had been killed by June 2013, climbing to 250,000 by August 2015. Certainly the war has resulted in a catastrophic humanitarian crisis with over 6.5 million people internally displaced in Syria and over 4.5 million refugees fleeing Syria to seek asylum in neighbouring countries, Europe and North America.³

^{1, 2, 3}Cultural Orientation Resource Center, "Refugees from Syria", November 2014. Available at <http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/backgrounders>. BBC News, "Syria: The story of the conflict", 11 March, 2016. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868.

This is My Syria is produced by the Refugee Response Team - Thompson Okanagan & Kootenays.

The stories and personal recollections were shared by Syrian families now living in Kelowna, Salmon Arm, Penticton and Osoyoos. Originally from Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Damascus, each family is working on settling in their new communities, learning Canadian culture and customs, and wanting to share about their culture and lives before the war drove them from their homes.

Their personal reminiscences are presented, along with background information on Syria. We encourage you to get to know your new Syrian neighbors and to learn about their Syria from them. You can also learn more through our Taaloo Zorouna (Come Visit Us) video series at www.kcr.ca. Additional information on Syria and Islam sourced as cited.

Refugee Response Team Thompson-Okanagan & Kootenays

The situation in Syria has captured the interest of people through the world and generated a great deal of humanitarian support for the hundreds of thousands of refugees, fleeing their homeland in search of peace.

In Canada, over 25,000 refugees were settled between November 4, 2015 and February 29, 2016. That number has risen to 40,081, as of January 29, 2017. BC is the third highest recipient of Syrian refugees with over 300 Syrians having settled in the Thompson Okanagan and Kootenays.

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WelcomeBC

BC Refugee Readiness Fund is part of the WelcomeBC umbrella of services, made possible through funding from the Province of British Columbia.

The Religions and Ethnic Groups of Syria

The majority (90%) of Syrians, including both Muslims and Christians, are Arab, with Kurds nearly making up the other 10%. The Muslim population is 74% Sunni Muslim and 16% Alawite, Druze and Ismaili.⁴

Syria has a strong history of religious tolerance and acceptance and while faith is very important, the people are not fanatical about what to believe. Before the war, Syrian people from different religions and ethnicities were living side by side. Both Muslim and Christian holidays are officially recognized in Syria, meaning wide-spread understanding of both religions' traditions. Interfaith marriages were accepted, however, as the war has continued, battle lines are starting to be drawn on ethnic and religious grounds.⁵

"I am Muslim and my cousins are Christians," says one refugee from Damascus. "We never noticed the difference between us until the war started. We are all Syrians but now they divided us into small communities with names like Sunnis, Shiites, Christians..."

^{4, 5} Cultural Orientation Resource Center, "Refugees from Syria", November 2014, www.culturalorientation.net/learning/backgrounders.



Entrance to the Souk Al-Hamidiyyah

Syrian Refugees in Canada Statistics

40,081* Syrian Refugees Welcomed to Canada

Refugee Category	# of Refugees
Government Assisted Refugee (GAR)	21,876
Blended-Visa Office-Referral Refugee (BVORs)	3,931
Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR)	14,274

Over 350 communities in Canada have welcomed families.

In the Thompson Okanagan & Kootenays, we have welcomed over 300 refugees.

*as of Jan 29, 2017. Source:

<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/milestones.asp>

Who are Muslims?

Muslims are people who follow the teaching of Islam. As believers, they believe in one God and the Prophet Muhammad as his last messenger. They also believe in all the prophets which preceded Prophet Muhammad.

Five Pillars of Islam

There are five pillars of Islam that the Muslim acts upon.

1. A Muslim must testify that "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."
2. Perform daily prayers, praising Allah five times a day while facing Mecca where Allah revealed the Quran to Muhammad.
3. Zakat or obligatory charity which must be given to the poor.
4. Fasting between dawn and sunset during the month of Ramadan every year. Ramadan ends with a feast called Eid.
5. Perform pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime if the person has the means to do so.

The Economy

From the perspective of the refugees interviewed, the economy in Syria was good prior to the conflict. There were a lot of jobs available and the majority of Syrians were middle-class and well known for being hard-working. The people interviewed were from a variety of sectors, including shop owners, businessmen, salesmen, farmers and labourers.

The country was self-sufficient with strong agriculture, industry and oil. Life was relatively inexpensive and importantly, the poor could live with dignity. With good health care and free education, literacy rates in Syria were very high prior to the conflict. Syrians have a strong sense of egalitarianism. Consider this tradition shared by one of the interviewees:

In each city you will find a souk (market) in the old part of town. The souk is divided into different sections, for example the jewellery is all in one part of the market and other merchandisers are grouped in other parts. In the jewellery market, once the stores open, all of the owners sit in front of their doors. The first store to sell something, blocks his door with a chair as a sign that he has already made money and is giving a chance to others to do the same. It is very common and customers understand the symbolism of the chair.

Additionally, the store owners who sell the same type of merchandise get together once a month and collect money to give to someone in need.

The RRT-TO is spearheaded by KCR Immigrant Services, South Okanagan Community and Immigrant Services, Vernon and District Immigrant and Community Services, Shuswap Settlement Services & Kamloops Immigrant Services, with input from government, health, education, business, private sponsors and community organizations.

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