

This is my Syria ...

Reflections from Syrian Refugees making the Thompson Okanagan their home.

Family & Social Life

Syrians have strong relationships with their families and neighbours. They are very sociable and spend significant amount of time visiting each other. Casually dropping by and visiting with your neighbours is very common place and it is one of the things that the refugees settling in the Okanagan have difficulty adjusting to.

"Before, it is impossible to have a day passing without meeting one of our relatives," says a man from Homs. "Syrian people are very kind, honest, passionate and they like to help others. They respect others' opinions and accept each other's differences. Also, they have a sense of humour, they like to make jokes and have fun - especially the people from Homs," he laughs.

The family is the center of everything and extended families get together on a regular basis and have social gatherings where they chat while drinking tea or Arabic coffee and eating delicious home-made sweets. The visits are very impromptu and you don't need to call before-hand.

Syrians like to go for picnics almost every week in big groups, sometimes a few families from the neighbourhood go for picnics either to the mountain or near the river. They enjoy a barbecue, play music and sing popular songs.

A lady from Homs reminisces *"we used to go for picnic with my family and relatives to the Assi river, have fun and swim, oh I miss those days"*.

Families are generally large and there are close bonds of love and support, as well as responsibility. Family members are duty-bound to care for each other and to make sure they don't do anything to hurt or shame other family members.¹

Syria is a patriarchal society, with the oldest male as the head of the household. Although he is the final decision maker, he values input from family members, including women. Depending on economic status, the role of women changes. Overall women are responsible for the care of the family, while men are typically the wage earners. In the upper classes, women are often well educated with careers in a variety of professions and in the lower classes, women are used to working outside the home to help support the family. In all situations, the women take great pride in looking after their homes and families.²

Syrians have great respect for the elderly. Seniors have a high status in society, especially one's own parents. In general, as parents age, they live with one of their offspring. Children generally stay in the family home until they are married.

Most Syrian marriages are carefully arranged by their families. The young couple is usually engaged for a length of time to allow the partners to get to know each other and if they are not well suited, the engagement will be called off. While polygamy is legal, it is not common. Women do not generally take the names of their husbands and both partners keep whatever property they entered the marriage with.³

^{1, 2, 3} Cultural Orientation Resource Center, "Refugees from Syria", November 2014. www.culturalorientation.net/learning/backgrounders.



Norias of Hama on the Asi River. The name translates from the Arabic for 'wheel of pots' and for centuries they lifted water in to small aqueducts to irrigate the surrounding fields.
Photo: www.kuriositas.com

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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Family Dynamics

Children are highly desired and adults are often very affectionate with all children - even those of a stranger. It is quite common for kids to be held on an adult's lap and to have their cheeks kissed and hair tousled.⁴

Pre-conflict, children had a lot of freedom to explore and play in the villages and neighborhoods as it was seen as very safe. Children are used to playing together, with older siblings helping with the younger ones.

Although both men and women (regardless of background) dress modestly, it is normal for women to breastfeed anywhere in public, whenever they need to nourish their children.

Once girls reach puberty, they are more likely to stay at home, rather than play outside and start to help with chores and to learn how to cook.⁵

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



Photos: (top) Souk Al-Hamidiyah in Damascus <http://www.thetravelword.com/2010/08/22/photo-of-the-week-al-hamidiyah-souq-the-ancient-mall-of-damascus-syria/> (bottom) Syrian capital Aleppo pre-conflict. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-past-idUSKBN13Y13S>

Language

The typical Muslim greeting is *Assalaamu Alaikum* (May peace be with you), to which you would reply *Walaikum Assalaam* (Peace be with you too).

In Syria, because of its diversity, a typical greeting is *Marhaba* (Welcome), and the reply *Ahlain*.

Other phrases include:

Welcome/ good to see you - *ahla wu sahla*

How are you (to a male)? - *keefak*

How are you (to a female)? - *Keefek*

Thank God (I'm good) - *ilhamdilah tamam*

Yes - *ai'* No - *la'*

Thank you - *shukran* Response to 'thank you' - *afwan*

Source: www.syriancooking.com

Download a list of essential phrases:

www.syriancooking.com/attachments/096_essential-phrases.pdf

What they are missing ... Four Perspectives:

A teenage girl from Homs:

"I had freedom with respect to my religion and tradition, I used to visit my girlfriends and go shopping with them to the souk in the old city."

A teenage boy from Hama:

"I used to go with my friends sometimes after school to another city that is close, we eat dinner in popular restaurant known of the best grills, play cards, shop and then go home late at night, we had a good life and it was very safe even after midnight as people stay up late at night".

A woman from Aleppo:

"Syria was a paradise on earth, if there were no war, I would never leave Syria"

A man from Aleppo:

"When the war started I had to live in Lebanon, it was hard for me to be so close to Syria because I couldn't go there. At least now I am in Canada far away from Syria so I don't have this thought anymore."

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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