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## Family escaping 'terrible' life in Syria will ring in first Canadian Christmas with a Star gift box

By Tamar Harris Staff Reporter  
Tues., Nov. 28, 2017

A newly arrived family from Syria isn't quite sure what to expect during their first holiday season in Canada — but a [Santa Claus Fund](#) gift box is in the cards for their nearly 2-year-old son.

Suliman Hafed and Betul Salih arrived in Canada from Syria via Turkey in March with their son, Halid Hafiz, and were referred to the Toronto Star charity by Manal Khader, employment access liaison at Catholic Crosscultural Services, who acted as translator during the interview with the Star.



Betul Salih, left, and Suliman Hafed, with their son, Halid Hafiz. “It’s been very good here,” Hafed said through a translator. “We know that this is the top country.” (TAMAR HARRIS / TORONTO STAR)

“They think it’s very nice, for the happiness of children, to do something nice for children, something just for them,” Khader translated. “They really like the idea.”

Hafed and Salih fled the violence in Aleppo, Syria, about four years ago. They spent three years in Turkey, where they welcomed their son before coming to Canada as government-sponsored refugees in March.

Halid, an adventurous boy with happy eyes and a big smile, toddled around the room and drew on a notepad during the interview with the Star. Upon discovering the light switch, he

flicked the room's lights on-and-off with a laugh and a cheeky grin, to the great entertainment of his parents.

"He's pulling on the lights to celebrate," Salih said with a laugh.

Halid will be one of 45,000 children aged 12 and younger in Toronto, Mississauga, Brampton, Pickering and Ajax to receive a Santa Claus Fund gift box this Christmas.

Recipients get a warm shirt (toddlers get a fleece-lined tracksuit while newborn infants get a five-piece set that includes onesies), a warm hat, warm gloves or mittens, socks, a toy, a book, cookies and dental hygiene items (aged 4 and up) inside. Every dollar raised goes toward the [cost of the gifts](#).

For many of the kids, it's the only present they'll receive.

Peter Chiu, the settlement services manager at CCS, said the Santa Claus Fund shows newcomers "that Canada, as a country and especially for Toronto, is a welcoming environment."

This being the family's first Christmas in Canada, they're not entirely sure what to expect — but they're especially excited after seeing the Canada 150 celebrations.

The sesquicentennial took place only months after the family arrived in Canada. The day of their arrival stands out in Hafed's mind — he remembers it exactly: "15 March."

Hafed has found Canada to be "very nice."

"It's been very good here," Hafed said through a translator. "Coming from Turkey, this place is so much better, and even compared to other nations. We know that this is the top country."

Salih said her family, now living in Scarborough, has been happy and comfortable since arriving.

The couple said the situation in Syria was "terrible." Their basic needs were not met, and there was no safety or security.

"There's no water, there's no electricity," Salih said through a translator. "We couldn't live there."

Hafed and Salih were university students in Aleppo. He studied accounting, she taught and studied the Arabic language.

Both want to continue their education in Canada, once they're more proficient in English. In the meantime, they're working on learning the language and are taking a food-handling class at CCS.

And come Christmastime, they'll "for sure" be bringing little Halid to take his first photo with Santa.

*If you have been touched by the Santa Claus Fund or have a story to tell, please email [santaclausfund@thestar.ca](mailto:santaclausfund@thestar.ca). Click here to [donate now](#).*



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