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CANADA

The struggles and successes of five refugee families

By **Nadine Yousif** Star Edmonton
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In the last three years, 60,000 Syrian refugees landed on Canadian soil, one of the largest humanitarian efforts in our history.

Despite the \$1-billion price tag attached to the Liberal government's Syrian refugee initiative, to date there is a dearth of comprehensive data to show whether resettlement has been the unprecedented success the government says it is.

In an effort to gauge how government-assisted refugees — the most vulnerable and at-risk population — are faring, Star reporters spent four months interviewing more than 30 experts and 20 refugee families across the country. They told stories of ongoing language barriers and mental health struggles, as well as child-care, employment and housing woes. It raises questions about whether the expeditious way they were ushered into the country has left a glaring hole in their future.

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Here are five of their stories.



SAINT JOHN—Deep in the north end of Saint John, N.B., lies Crescent Valley, a neighbourhood transformed in the last few years with the arrival of more than 600 Syrian refugees to the city.

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community support, and the local convenience store quickly began stocking Middle Eastern staples like soaked grape leaves and licorice drink.

By every definition, Crescent Valley has become home for many of those families. It certainly has for Reham Abazid, 32, who escaped harrowing conditions in Daraa, Syria, including airstrikes on her home. Pregnant with twins at the time, she lost one of the babies from physical trauma following the blast.

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Abazid has no plans to return to Syria. “Never,” she says firmly. Saint John is her new home now. It’s where she belongs.

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After initial euphoria fades, the stress of resettlement triggers trauma in Syrian refugees

ment-assisted refugee, Abazid arrived in 2016 from a Jordanian refugee camp with her husband and two young children, who are now nine and six. She

faced the same difficulties as other families—lack of English language proficiency and work experience, alongside trauma from the war—but she was determined to become a success story.

She quickly began learning English through the local YMCA, while making connections with anyone who offered a helping hand. Her goal was to be off government financial assistance after her first year in Canada. Her secret? She never shied away from asking people to “explain.”

“That’s the word I use the most,” Abazid laughed.

Three years later, Abazid works as a translator at the same YMCA where she received English-language training, and her husband has found a job as a mechanic with the help of a few local Saint Johners. Her children, now in French immersion, are becoming fluent in three languages—French, English and Arabic.

Abazid acknowledges some of her neighbours are still struggling to make meaningful ties to their new community. But she expressed gratitude for her new life, and has shifted her focus to helping other

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After initial euphoria fades, the stress of resettlement triggers trauma in Syrian refugees



HALIFAX—Within weeks of arriving from Jordan, the Al Saied family moved from temporary hotel accommodations into a four-bedroom apartment in the suburbs of Halifax. That was almost three years ago, and Mohamad, Rouida and six of their children are still there.

“They were very lucky,” said Wenche Gausdal, a settlement manager

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many Syrian refugees have settled. With housing sorted out quickly, they began the hard work of learning English, looking for work, and trying to bring their oldest son and his family from a Jordanian refugee camp to Halifax.

According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the Al Saieds are among about 1,700 Syrian refugees who have settled in Nova Scotia between November 2015 and September 2018. More than 60 per cent of those, including the Al Saieds, were sponsored by the federal government, and more than 80 per cent ended up in Halifax, which has the most resources for newcomers.

Still, Halifax's housing market has posed a challenge for many Syrian refugees, since most families have five to six members and the majority of rentals in Halifax have just one or two bedrooms. Records from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation show that since Syrian refugees started arriving in late 2015, the number of rentals with three or more bedrooms has floated between eight and nine per cent of the total rental market.

The median rent of those units with three or more bedrooms has crept up from \$1,240 in October 2015 to \$1,325 in October 2018, while the vacancy rate has slipped from 3.8 to 1.5 per cent.

While the Al Saieds were fortunate to find housing right away, which was paid for by the federal government for one year, they've encountered other obstacles.

Khaled, 21, spoke on behalf of his family, because his parents are still building fluency in English. He and his siblings, who range in age from 9 to 18, have taken to the new language quickly by studying at public school, but his parents have only been able to study English intermittently, in between looking after the kids and working outside the home. Rouida is a cleaner and Mohamad works in construction.

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Canada.

“I’ve got like a little niece now and I haven’t seen her, I haven’t touched her ... Her and my other nephew, I don’t think they will remember us that much if they grow (up) far away from us,” Khaled said.

Five Halifax families the Al Saieds have met and befriended since 2016 offered to sponsor Abdulaziz, and Khaled said at the start of February that he expects his brother’s family to receive final approval for immigration in the next month or two.

The family plans to stay in Halifax, which Khaled describes as “peaceful,” and where they’ve begun to feel at home. Khaled

graduated from high school in Halifax and has since started working as a property manager for the company they rent from.

Gausdal credits the Al Saied’s relatively smooth settlement to Halifax’s size.

“We’re in many ways very unique because we’re small enough and have a long history of partnership with many organizations,” she said, pointing to collaboration between the immigrant services association and the Nova Scotia Landlords Association, among other organizations.

“We worked very well across many organizations when (the Syrian refugees) all came ... I feel because of that we could do a lot of things fairly fast when they came.”



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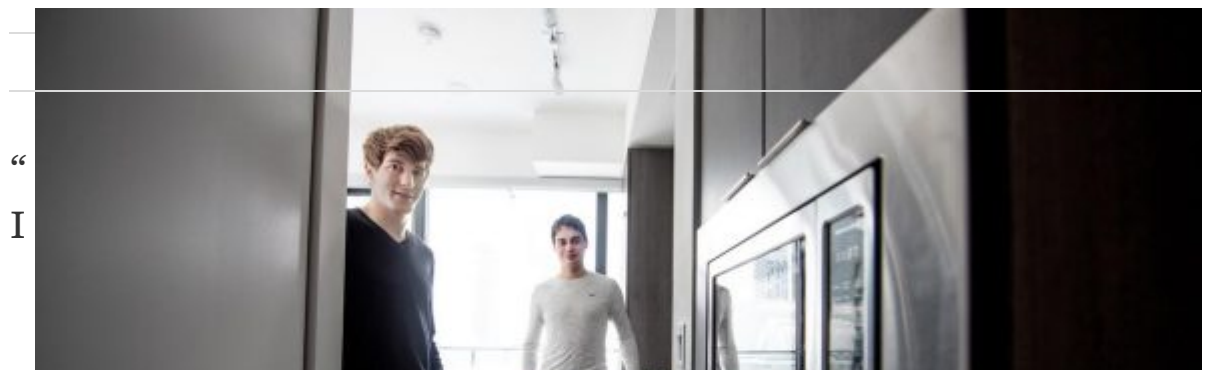


CALGARY—When Alaa Kazmouz received a phone call from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a sense of relief washed over him.

Life was difficult for his family of five, and he had applied for refugee status in several European countries, as well as Canada and the United States. Twenty-two days after he got the call, Kazmouz, 35, his wife and their three children were on their way to Canada. Now, they're one of 2,600 Syrian refugees that call Calgary home.

But almost three years since their arrival, Kazmouz's hopes of building a better life have been shattered. He's mostly confined to his home because of the language barrier, which disconnects him from the world outside. His greatest wish is to find work that will take him off social assistance.

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How Canadians opened their hearts to refugees

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now ... My quality of life would be better,” Kazmouz said in Arabic. “I would see people, I would improve my language.”

But work is difficult to get without English, and learning the language has fallen to the wayside as he helps take on parenting duties. Three of his children are in elementary school, and the youngest two, born in Canada after their arrival are still nursing. With affordable daycare

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“I want to get out and talk to people, I want to be able to move ahead with life here,” Kazmouz said. “Imagine not being able to communicate with people in their own language ... They’re in front of me, but I’m at one place, and they’re at a completely different place.”

The one silver lining is the bright future ahead of the children, all of whom have embraced life in Canada. “Here, my children wake me up to go to school,” Kazmouz said. “They’re always so excited to go.”

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For the parents, studying, finding work and even accessing basic health care and other services is increasingly difficult because they can’t speak English. Kazmouz’s wife Rehib said she’s always had “big dreams” of going to school and working—a dream that becomes more distant as the years go by.

“My wife and I are sacrificing for our children,” he said.


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CALGARY—The Kanaans were privately sponsored to Canada by a family friend who already lived in Calgary. Like many Syrian refugees, they never envisioned abandoning their country.

When they left Syria in 2011 to go to Lebanon, they told themselves it was just for 10 days, until fighting ended in their hometown of Al-Zabadani. It soon turned into four years. “After four years, we knew there was no way we’d be back,” Mohammad Kanaan said in an interview in Arabic.

Instead, they made their way to Canada, arriving on Dec. 31, 2015, and ringing in the new year with hope for the future. The family has since settled in a modest home with a sizable kitchen and backyard in one of the city’s northern neighbourhoods.

The transition wasn’t easy at first, Kanaan said, but with some help from his sponsor, he gathered all the money he could get and started his own construction business in Calgary. In the three years since, the family has never been on social assistance, with Kanaan providing full financial support for his family.

Despite success in their new Canadian life, an important part of their life is still missing. Their two daughters, 20 and 25, remain in Lebanon. “My family has been split in half,” Kanaan said.

The two daughters are married with children, and therefore considered separate families by officials. But Kanaan’s wife, Nada, had never been apart from her children.

“I told them I didn’t want to leave, because my daughters are still here,” she said, crying all over again at the memory of leaving them

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Family reunification is an issue that follows many Syrian refugees to Canada. Many times, money is the main barrier for these families looking to be reunited, who don't have the financial means to privately sponsor other family members, since sponsors have to prove they can support refugees for a full year.

But while money isn't an issue for the Kanaans, navigating a complicated immigration system with a language barrier is the biggest hurdle. They don't know where to turn, Kanaan said.

"I just have one request, to bring my daughters here," Kanaan said. "Nothing more, nothing less."



VANCOUVER—"Come, sit," Amera Ohan says as the family gathers for supper in their Burnaby, B.C., apartment.

Ohan, her five children and her daughter-in-law crowded around a small, card-sized table, sitting shoulder to shoulder on benches and folding chairs, and started with sludgy, black Turkish coffee. The

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mujaddara, and a salad of cucumbers dressed with a thin yogurt.

The family gathered at the table a week after Ohan, 49, and her four youngest children, Syrian refugees from a settlement camp in Turkey, were reunited with her eldest child, Mohammed Alsaleh, at Vancouver International Airport. But it had been seven years since they last saw each other.

In 2011, as the Arab Spring spilled into Syria, Alsaleh used his cellphone to film student-led demonstrations against the government's torture of 15 teens arrested for pro-Arab Spring graffiti. He was arrested and charged with terrorism; his family sold their home in 2013 so they could bribe officials to release him. He fled to a

refugee camp in Lebanon, where the federal government sponsored him to come to Canada.

"Finally we are closer to having a normal life that we didn't have for the past seven years," said Alsaleh, 29, who hugged his mother at the arrivals gate for a full 40 seconds and spun her around and around while their tears flowed. "We can start over and live together in peace."

Preparing for the family's arrival was far from easy. Alsaleh spent three weeks traipsing from one apartment to another, visiting dozens of listings, but often losing out to rival tenants.

In Vancouver, one of Canada's most unaffordable cities, it's no surprise that housing is an issue. With a vacancy rate of 0.8 per cent in October 2018, according to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, there is less than one apartment available for every hundred.

In the end Alsaleh, who works for the federal Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, moved in with the family so he could help with the

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Vancouver.

According to the Immigration Services Society of B.C., roughly two-thirds of the nearly 5,000 Syrian refugees who came to B.C. between November 2015 and December 2018 were government sponsored. These are people deemed most in need of safe harbour because they tend to come from large families or single-parent households, or have complex health issues.

Some families have learned the only way to make up the rent shortfall is to supplement it with the Canada Child Benefit, which gives lower-income families \$541 a month for each child under six, and \$457 for kids aged six to 17.

In July 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said it was meant to help with “things like new shoes, healthy groceries, summer camps or class trips ... all of these little things, things that we do to make sure that our kids have great childhoods.”

But with the City of Vancouver’s rental vacancy rate less than a third of the national average, high rents eat away at the money and the situation is even worse in some suburbs.

The median rent in the City of Vancouver last fall was \$2,427 a month for a three-bedroom apartment, more than twice the national average of \$1,097. In Surrey, where 44 per cent of Syrian refugees settled, the median rent for the same unit is \$1,307, but the 0.4 per cent vacancy rate is even worse. Burnaby is little better, with a higher median rent of \$1,672, but its vacancy rate was unique in the region, rising from 0.6 to two per cent last year.

The median rent in the City of Vancouver in fall 2017 was \$2,313 a month for a three-bedroom apartment, or 218 per cent higher than the national average of \$1,063. In Surrey, where 44 per cent of Syrian refugees settled, the median rent for the same unit is \$1,213, but the

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Government-sponsored refugees receive welfare rates from the federal government for one year. A single person gets a maximum of \$375 for housing. A family of five gets \$750 a month, which covers less than a third of the Asalehs rent; Mohammed pays the rest from his salary.

Many families end up as far away as Maple Ridge and Chilliwack and, in one case, a family of 13 settled far into the Fraser Valley, hours from any refugee services.

“Where on Earth can you find a place that could fit all those people in Vancouver?” Alsaleh said. “They ended up away from everything. They had to basically live in the countryside.”



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