

THE HOEKELMAN CENTER

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SCHOOL OF
**MEDICINE &
DENTISTRY**
UNIVERSITY of ROCHESTER
MEDICAL CENTER

Refugees in Rochester

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention (under the UN High Commissioner for Refugees) defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”

- According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) there are 15.4 million refugees worldwide.
- A vast majority will return to their home country; a smaller number will settle in the country to which they fled; *and only 1% of all refugees will resettle in a third country (eg. the US).*

How do refugees get to the US?

1. Register with the UNHCR in the country to which the individual has fled.
2. Referral is made to a Refugee Resettlement Center (US funds 9 throughout world).
3. Dept. of Homeland Security screens individuals.
4. Approved individuals go through health screening and brief cultural orientation prior to arrival.
5. Upon arrival, immediate assistance is provided by the Department of State's Reception & Placement Program and one of 9 *domestic* resettlement agencies across the country.
6. These *domestic* resettlement agencies then partner with *local* resettlement agencies such as Catholic Family Center.

What happens to refugees after they arrive in Rochester?

Core Resettlement Services are provided by the Catholic Family Center (CFC) over the initial 6 month resettlement period:

- Airport Reception
- Assistance securing safe, decent and affordable housing including appropriate furnishings and household items
- Basic Needs Assistance - provision of initial food, clothing and personal items
- Community and Cultural Orientation
- Assistance obtaining social security cards
- Referrals and assistance accessing services from medical, educational, employment and public benefit agencies
- Case Management

Refugees may access the following CFC Refugee Services for up to 5 years from their date of arrival:

- Employment Assistance
- Transitional Services Support
- Refugee Trainings & Ethnic Community Workshops
- Immigration Assistance
- Interpreting / Translating

What are our local organizations and agencies that serve the refugee population?

Catholic Family Center - 87 N Clinton Ave, Rochester, NY 14604 (585) 546-7220

Mary's Place - 414 Lexington Ave, Rochester, NY 14613 (585) 270-8626

Refugees Helping Refugees - 835 South Ave Rochester, NY 14620 (585) 563-7747

Saint's Place - 46 S Main St, Pittsford, NY 14534 (585) 385-6860

Islamic Center of Rochester - 727 Westfall Rd, Rochester, NY 14620 (585) 442-0117

Rochester Refugee Resettlement Services - <http://www.rochesterrefugeenetwork.org/rtrs/>

Sources:

Rochester Refugee Resettlement Services - <http://www.rochesterrefugeenetwork.org/rtrs/>

US Department of State - <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/index.htm> and

<http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm>

Syrian refugee family faces difficulties here



Women line up to eat during a Syrian refugee picnic at Islamic Center of Rochester. Most of the women in this photo are refugees of Syria. (Photo: OLIVIA LOPEZ/ @OLOPEZ4/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)



Justin Murphy, @citizenmurphy 11:58 p.m. EDT August 20, 2016

There is a saying in Syria: Let us lack for bread, as long as our children can learn.

Until five years ago, Bahzat Aziz and his wife, Atie Ali, had no such decision to make. Bahzat's salary as a teacher bought plenty of bread, and school was the top priority for their five children.

Two of them were grown and two others were in high school. The middle girl, Dilan, was at college, reading Shakespeare in her English literature classes.

"Life was good," Atie Ali said through an interpreter. "We were all together. We were really happy." Much has changed. Five years of war has torn Syria apart, killing hundreds of thousands and scattering innocent families around the globe.



Bahzat Aziz, with daughter Dilan beside him, talked about some of the violence they witnessed. (Photo: TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ @tyee23/staff photographer)

The Aziz family has lacked for both bread and learning, among many other things. They have been uprooted from their home and forced to leave behind their friends, family and possessions in a journey to a new home in Rochester.

They came here in July 2015, the very first Syrian refugees to settle in Monroe County. More are arriving now, the beginning of a wave that eventually will add to the community's cultural fabric just as the Germans, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Vietnamese and Sudanese before them.

The essentials of life have been restored: The two youngest children attend high school in Greece, and Dilan has enrolled at Monroe Community College for the fall. But the struggle of a refugee is not only material.

When asked what they miss most, they say: our people. When asked their goals for the future, they say: to see our family again.

"A bird doesn't like to leave its nest," Bahzat said through an interpreter. "Why would a person want to leave his home?"

The Aziz family lived in Qamishli, a city about the size of Rochester on the Turkish border. Bahzat and Atie were classmates as children, just as they are now, 50 years later, in a beginner's English class.

Most of Qamishli's original residents 100 years ago were Assyrians, an ethnic group fleeing persecution from the Ottoman Empire in present-day Turkey and Iran. It also had until recently one of the largest Christian populations in Syria along with many Kurds; the Aziz family among them.

"Life was wonderful; we were all living in peace," Bahzat Aziz said through an interpreter. "We didn't differentiate between Muslim and Christian or Arab and Kurd. Our life was good."

That foundation first shifted in 2011, when the Arab Spring currents of unrest and democratic protests reached Syria and its long-ruling president, Bashar al-Assad. Peaceful protests were met with violence; the city was rocked with explosions as the two sides stiffened.

Politics and religious extremism are the two things Bahzat Aziz and his family do not wish to discuss. Whatever their position was, it did not help — the school where Bahzat taught closed in 2012 after it became unsafe for students to attend.



Dilan Aziz was in college five years ago and had to delay her college education because her family fled Syria. She will be attending Monroe Community College in September. (Photo: TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ @tyee23/staff photographer)

Dilan stopped going to college after watching dozens die in a bombing on campus. Instead, she spent her days in the house, afraid to leave for food or water.

"There was no safety — it was all danger," Bahzat said. "We didn't know where death was coming from. From explosions; from being shot. It was not safe."

There were impassioned discussions among their friends and family about whether to leave and where to go. The two eldest Aziz children left for Turkey ahead of the rest of the family and eventually made it to Denmark. Other friends and family went to Lebanon, to Iraq, to Germany.

In 2013, while the borders were still mostly unguarded, the rest of the family, including Atie's ill mother, crossed into Turkey with their clothes and documents and found a house to rent in Istanbul.

It was safe there, but no permanent home. Bahzat was told he was too old to work; instead his children spent 14 hours a day in a clothing factory for wages that barely kept the family afloat.

"My kids were at the top of their class (in Syria), and now they were just working as general laborers," Bahzat said. "When I saw other kids walking with backpacks and my kids weren't in school, I felt like my heart was bleeding. Like it was burning."

They registered as refugees with the United Nations and went through an exacting series of interviews, medical exams and background checks. They hoped to go to Europe, where they could be near the two eldest children and Bahzat's brothers in Germany.

Instead, they learned, they had been accepted into the United States. Their escape from Syria, then, would mean a continued lengthy separation from the rest of the family.



Dilan Aziz, left, and Areej Abdulrazzad, both refugees of Syria, chat during a Syrian refugee picnic at the Islamic Center of Rochester. (Photo: OLIVIA LOPEZ/ @OLOPEZ4/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

“Of course, I thank America for this humanitarian decision,” Bahzat said. “But I hesitated, because I knew I wouldn’t be able to see my children again. It was a very difficult decision. ... But for the safety of my children who were with me — so they could be safe and study and be away from the war — we decided to come here.”

It was several months before they learned where in the United States they would be going. When they discovered it would be Rochester, they began Googling their new home: the Flower City. Cold winters. Beautiful fall foliage.

None of them had ever been outside Syria. They left for good at 1 p.m. July 8, 2015. “I don’t even know how to describe it,” Atie said. “I felt lost.”

Consider this as a measure of the difficulty that refugees face in resettlement: After two years in a war zone in Syria and two years of uncertainty and poverty in Turkey, the Aziz family said their first year in Rochester was the most difficult of their lives.

The family first moved into a rental house on Smith Street in northwest Rochester, but relocated to an apartment complex in Greece after a month.

Their Greece apartment has no cockroaches, a significant improvement. On the other hand, getting around with public transportation can be an hours- long affair. To go to the market or their English classes requires multiple buses.

“We were hoping to go to school for English as quickly as possible,” Bahzat said. “(But) we learn about 10 words, then because it’s so tiring with the buses, we just forget.”

Atie’s mother died of cancer this spring after a long illness that required 24-hour attention. Bahzat has had surgery on his back and knee; Atie’s ankles become painful and swollen when she stands for more than 15 minutes at a time.

Despite their infirmity and lack of English, Bahzat and Atie are expected to seek work or take more classes in exchange for the housing assistance, food stamps and small cash supplement they receive. Those benefits have been interrupted more than once, fraying their nerves. Dilan and their older son, Zana, have both found jobs.

The two younger boys, Zana and Delshad, enrolled in high school in Greece and made the honor roll. The state tests, though, were a disaster. The interpreter that the school provided spoke a dialect of

Arabic they did not understand, so they failed in science and math.

They can retake the tests later this summer, but neither boy is prepared because; they have not been attending summer school because the district does not provide universal busing for it and they had no other way to get there.

Dilan, who speaks fluent English from her college days in Syria, should be having the easiest time. Instead, she spent several months at the hospital with her grandmother and is kept busy with family logistics.

"I have no friends — not that much," she said. "I'm busy all the time."

She had intended to enroll right away at MCC, but was preoccupied with her family's health problems. Instead, she finished a nine-month certificate program in emergency medical services through the Rochester City School District's adult education services.

She now plans to attend MCC this fall to study as a radiology technician, working in the morning and studying in the afternoon. She recently got her driver's license, and the family bought a used car.

Dilan's progress is the family's pride, and they are hoping to move closer to MCC's Brighton campus to make her commute easier. Still, she worries: "(When) I start at MCC, I won't be able to help my family. So I'm thinking, who will take care of them?"

Generally, the family says they have been welcomed warmly by people they meet. But Dilan, who keeps her head covered, said she has received curses and dirty looks.

"People here shouldn't judge me regarding my scarf or my clothes; it's just a part of my religion, and it shouldn't bother anyone," she said. "I have heard some people saying bad words (and) staring at me like a stranger. I'm like, 'What did I do?'"

Bahzat Aziz is asked: What would you like Americans to know about your family? He stops to think, because it is an important question and he wants to be understood.

"Before I say anything else, I have to thank the American government, because they helped my family. And Catholic Family Center. I thank everybody who lent a helping hand to my family.

"I just want the American people to know that we are also victims of terrorism. I want the American people — they are dignified and aware and intelligent — to know that we didn't come here for tourism and relaxation. ... We came here for our children, so they can live in peace and go to school and build a future away from the war."

When the Aziz family arrived last July, there were only a few dozen Syrians living in Rochester, none of them refugees. In the last few months, however, an additional 40 or so have arrived through the refugee resettlement process. The U.S. government has agreed to take in at least 10,000 Syrians, many of whom will come to Rochester.

Catholic Family Center and the Islamic Center of Rochester hosted a barbecue in early August for the newly arrived families to meet one another; grape leaves and hummus were served alongside hot dogs and pizza.

"The hard part is that they don't already have a community established," said Barbara Gallets of Catholic Family Center. "These (first) families will be the basis for those who come later."

Bahzat, Atie and Dilan said they will do everything they can to help those new Syrians, or any other refugees. The memories of their first days in Rochester, when they didn't know the word for bread or how to use a bus pass, are still fresh.

And while their adjustment continues, they are in better condition than they were when they arrived. Atie greets visitors with a platter of fruit from Price Rite and homemade cheese, apologizing that she can't make it quite right without the sort of milk she had back in Syria.

Now that they've been here a year, they are eligible for green cards. That in turn brings them closer to their dream of flying to Europe to see the rest of their family for the first time in years. Bahzat and Atie's eldest daughter in Denmark has multiple sclerosis and recurring brain inflammation that sometimes paralyzes her left side, another worry that keeps them awake at night.

"My daughter is sick and I can't even see her," Bahzat said. "For a parent, that's really difficult."

When the family left Qamishli in 2013, they left all their possessions behind in storage, thinking they would be able to return soon. Three years later, the prospect seems more distant than ever.

They try to stay in touch with people back in Syria, but communication is difficult. There is very little phone or internet access there; people wait to get a signal, then go on the roof and post quickly to Facebook to say they're OK.

"To return, it is our dream," Bahzat said. "If peace comes and everything settles down, of course we'll go. Why wouldn't we? But who knows? This could be 10, 20, 30 years. ... And even if we returned, it wouldn't be the same thing.

"Sometimes I can't even sleep. My brother is in Syria. My two sisters and brother are in Turkey. Two other brothers are in Germany. My children are in Denmark. When will I see them? I don't know."

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