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Haeyoun Park

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/10/21/us/where-syrian-refugees-are-in-the-united-states.html>

## **Paris Attacks Intensify Debate Over How Many Syrian Refugees to Allow Into the U.S.**

After months of grueling trips to the United Nations refugee agency in Amman for repeated hourslong interviews as part of the refugee process, they found out they had been granted asylum. “Our life was about to change,” Mr. Mughrbel said in Arabic through a translator. “We were going to have a safe future for our kids, live a happy life, be in a better environment, be treated like a real person.”

Before departing for the United States, he and his family attended four days of orientation, where they were instructed in the ways of American life. How to drive a car. How to throw banana peels and other trash in a garbage can, not on the ground.

They were also schooled in what they should focus on when they arrived. Learn English, they were told. Find a job, because America is all about work. The United States is a wonderful place, they were told. People will respect you there.

On their first morning in their new Michigan apartment, they marveled at the lawns and trees. “We didn’t walk around because we were afraid we would get lost,” Mr. Mughrbel said. “So we just looked out the window.”

“When I saw all the grass,” said Ms. Hammadeh, 43, her large eyes widening, “I felt that I was reborn.”

She sheepishly recounted trivial missteps. A used minivan, bought for \$2,500, was accidentally filled with premium gas. An unfamiliar shampoo seemed to make her hair go temporarily thin.

But after four months, the family says it is financially independent, living on the earnings of the two sons, who work in a factory. Mr. Mughrbel, a cook and butcher in his native Syria, has found occasional work in a restaurant and, once his English is better, would like to open one of his own. Sometimes the family piles into the van after dinner at home and visits other Syrian families for coffee and gossip.

At home last week, family members bustled around as a soccer game played on the television, their preferred alternative to CNN and all its bleak bulletins. The smell of eggplant and spices wafted from the galley kitchen. A glance through the sliding patio doors revealed other modest but well-kept brick apartment buildings nearby.

They have kept their lives small, mostly going to work and back, and occasionally to the mosque. Mr. Mughrbel condemned the attacks in Paris. “These are criminals,” he said. “We are against this kind of stuff. You can’t just walk and kill somebody in the street. God won’t forgive you.”

#### Familiar Support

The task of keeping an eye on the new refugees has fallen to many of the 3,000 Syrian-Americans who have settled near Detroit for generations, a group known for its prosperity and devotion to higher education.

“There’s a significant number of Syrians here, so if the refugees don’t have relatives, they’ll at least have a lot of cultural connections,” said Dawud Walid, the executive director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “Our community in general has been very welcoming to refugees, irrespective to their national origin.”

Many established Syrians have formed volunteer organizations to assist in the resettlement process; supplied the refugees with furniture, clothing and food; and procured apartments, often at a discounted rent.

“We’re trying to help them find their way once they are here,” said Mahmoud Altattan, 65, the owner of Altas Greenfield Market, an emporium of produce, jarred olives, nuts and pita breads in Southfield, a Detroit suburb. “They have some difficulty adjusting at first. We try to put them on the right path.”

New refugees have come to his store in search of familiar comforts: pumpkin seeds, sweets and coffees from their native country. Mr. Altattan, who arrived in the United States from Syria 27 years ago and speaks softly accented English, said he advised the refugees that their most important task was to learn the language.

“Most of the Syrian community is educated people, doctors, lawyers,” said Mr. Altattan, who proudly noted that he counts a doctor and lawyer among his four grown children. “The new Syrians who are coming now are not so educated.”

Refugee resettlement officials say many of the new refugees have worked in blue-collar jobs in Syria, as carpenters, cooks, tailors and drivers. Many were poor and vulnerable when they fled.

Case managers for the agencies that assist with resettlement spend the first few months of refugees’ time in the United States in a sort of hand-holding: making nearly daily visits to their homes, helping them book doctor’s appointments and register their children for school, and driving them to the grocery store.

“When refugees arrive to the country, they don’t know what to do,” said Jewan Poulis, a program coordinator with Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, an agency that has received about one or two Syrian families each week since June. “They have no clue what’s going on.”

Amer Sharaf, a 36-year-old Syrian refugee who arrived in Michigan in August, said he and his family had been warmly embraced by the older Syrians, who helped them by donating furniture and translating bills. A house painter when he lived in Syria, he found a job here in an automotive factory, making \$9 an hour and working 50 hours a week.

But in his family’s apartment last week, as he and his wife, Marvat Mando, sipped Turkish coffee and watched their children read e-books on iPads provided by their public school, he turned to a new and troubling subject: the terrorist attacks in Paris and the governor’s subsequent criticism of Syrian refugees.

“It’s wrong,” Mr. Sharaf said. “Why is what happened everybody’s fault?”

#### Another Arrival

Last Tuesday afternoon, refugee specialists were gathered in a conference room at the suburban Detroit offices of Lutheran Social Services, discussing their final preparations for the arrival of a family of Syrian refugees on Wednesday evening.

Hani Aziz, a refugee specialist who is an Iraqi refugee himself, was assigned to pick up the family of three at 8 p.m., at the end of a long journey flying from Jordan to Frankfurt to Chicago and, finally, to Detroit.

Two days earlier, Mr. Snyder had proclaimed his opposition to new Syrian refugees entering the state. The specialists mentioned his name defiantly.

“If Snyder’s at the airport tomorrow, pushing them back onto the plane, then we know he’s for real,” Sean de Four, the vice president of children and family services at the agency, said wryly.

But when Wednesday evening came, the family’s flight was delayed for almost four hours. Standing in the arrivals terminal beneath an enormous Christmas wreath, Mr. Aziz scanned the crowds nervously, not knowing anything about the family except for names.

Finally, just after midnight, the family emerged, looking remarkably unrumpled: Nayef Buteh, 45; his wife, Feryal Jabur, 41; and their 8-year-old son, Arab.

Ms. Jabur was poised and elegant but sank onto a bench near the baggage claim.

“It was very tiring,” she said through a translator, looking glassy-eyed and exhausted. The couple’s son, wearing a black bomber jacket and jeans, slumped wordlessly next to her and lowered his dark eyelashes.

Mr. Buteh was polite but agitated, his eyes darting toward the exit. It had been 10 hours since his last cigarette. He stepped out into the mild November air and lit up.

“Thank God,” he said in Arabic, taking a deep drag.

Worn down by the grinding war in Syria, the family fled in March 2013 on the bed of a pickup, destined for a refugee camp in Jordan. But water was scarce there, and medical care was poor. Arab kept getting sick. The three sneaked out illegally, heading to a larger city and finding an apartment with relatives.

Close to two years later, the family was granted refugee status. “They said, ‘We’ll send you to Michigan,’” Mr. Buteh said as the minivan driven by Mr. Aziz hurtled down the nearly empty highway. “They told us it’s very beautiful, with a large Middle Eastern community and jobs in car factories.”

About 2 a.m., the van delivered the family to its small motel, where a spread of tea, chicken, rice, apples and pickles awaited on a night stand.

Mr. Buteh stepped out into the deserted parking lot and rapidly smoked another cigarette. He patted the beige, puffy coat he was wearing and glanced upward.

“I was not expecting it to be warm,” he said. “I came here expecting snow.”