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<http://triblive.com/news/editorspicks/11050841-74/refugees-motab-syrian>

**America, I am Sabha.**

Sabha Al-Ali, 28, practices one of her favorite English phrases, a scrum of kids circling her in their cramped apartment in Pittsburgh's Crafton Heights neighborhood.

She hasn't learned a lot of English yet, but what she knows is important.

“I'm alive. My babies are alive,” she says.

Motab, her 31-year-old husband, stands next to her, taking turns playing with their children: Mohammed, 8; Shadid, 6; Najdah, 4; Ahmed, 3; Hassan, 2; and baby Iman, born in Pittsburgh in February — the only family member who is an American citizen.

They're Sunni refugees from the war-torn Syrian city of Aleppo. They arrived here shortly before Christmas 2015, a handful of the 13,000 who arrived nationwide before the end of September.

“Every day, they bombed,” said Motab, pointing on a map to his home neighborhood of Al-Ansari, its blocks reduced to rubble by barrel bombs dropped by the aircraft of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime.

“They bombed the airport. Bombed the hospital,” he said. “No bread, no diesel.”

Over the past 12 months, Allegheny, Beaver and Washington counties absorbed without incident 139 Syrian refugees, including this family, according to the Pennsylvania Refugee Resettlement Program.

They're the lucky ones. The civil war in Syria has claimed more than 400,000 lives and left 12 million citizens internally displaced or cast out as refugees, according to the United Nations.

Motab and Sabha realize they and their children unwittingly have become political fodder in the American presidential election. As Syrian refugees in the crucial battleground state of Pennsylvania, they've been castigated as terrorism risks for months by Republican nominee Donald Trump. He repeatedly has pledged to bar refugees like them — and other Muslims — from entering the United States.

Trump's running mate, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, last week lost again in court as the U.S. 7th Circuit Court of Appeals reiterated that Pence cannot block aid to Syrian refugees resettling in Indiana.

Trump's son, Donald Jr., a surrogate on the campaign stump, recently compared Syrian refugees to a bowl of poison-laced Skittles in interviews with the Tribune-Review and other media. Some refugees are safe, but others might be lethal, so none should come, he suggested.

It's an idea that seems crazy to Motab, his Al-Ali kin and three other Syrian refugees interviewed by the Trib.

“Terrorists? The terrorists are taking over Syria,” said Motab, pointing on the map to militias loyal to Al Nusra and “Daesh,” the pejorative Arabic abbreviation for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

“That's why we came here! We came to escape terrorists!” he said. “I think America is good for me. I'm happy to be here. We're safe, and you're nice people.”

NOT AN EASY JOURNEY

Fleeing the devastation and encroachment of jihadist militias opposed to the Damascus government, Motab and his family spent five years in a pair of refugee camps in Jordan, the neighboring Arab nation that has taken in nearly 600,000 Syrian refugees.

Daughter Shadid bears the scars of their journey: disfigured flesh running like ivy up her back, caused by a vat of boiling water that fell over in a tent city sprawling across the desert.

With an estimated 65 million people displaced worldwide by violence — the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II — the White House has urged Congress to resettle 110,000 refugees from across the globe in the new fiscal year that began in October, a tally 29 percent higher than in last fiscal year.

A divided Congress has been reluctant to act. Last year, lawmakers OK'd funding for 75,000 refugees, and President Obama's administration flew in 10,000, forcing federal and state agencies to stretch resources to accommodate their resettlement.

More than 3.2 million refugees from around the world have arrived in America since 1975, many of them Russian Jews escaping the former Soviet Union and people fleeing communist Vietnam, according to the U.S. State Department.

Since 2001, the United States has become a home for more than 800,000 refugees arriving from conflicts or persecution worldwide.

In Allegheny, Beaver and Washington counties, 598 refugees from all conflicts have been resettled — all but 10 in Pittsburgh and surrounding suburban communities.

MORE VETTING

Before they arrive here, refugees are vetted by agents from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security and its Citizens and Immigration Services wing.

For those coming from nations like Syria, families must obtain special Security Advisory Opinion clearances from U.S. law enforcement and security and spy agencies before they can be resettled here.

Applicants have their names and biometric information — such as fingerprints — checked against federal and international databases to detect criminals or militants.

“I think that the odds of a Syrian refugee becoming a terrorist are very, very low,” said Anne Speckhard, an adjunct psychiatry professor at Georgetown University School of Medicine and director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism.

While “sleeper cells” loyal to ISIS infiltrated Europe alongside tens of thousands of refugees fleeing Syria, they didn't face the same battery of database searches and face-to-face interviews over a long span of time like Motab and his family, Speckhard pointed out.

“But that doesn't mean that some (won't) become radicalized once they're here,” she said.

Authorities arrested a pair of Iraqi refugees in 2011 in Kentucky for plotting to send weapons to insurgents killing American soldiers. An Uzbek refugee was caught in 2013 in Idaho while planning to carry out attacks in the United States.

More lethal terrorist attacks came from Muslim-American citizens or immigrants who arrived in the United States through different programs, such as the Boston Marathon bombing by the ethnic Chechen brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, and Omar Mateen, the nightclub shooter in Orlando, Fla., who was born in New York to Afghan parents.

“So what does that tell us? What that tells us is that we need to do a good job of integrating this family when they arrive,” Speckhard said.

HELPING THEM FIT IN

A top international expert on radicalization and violence, Speckhard said, “If you reach out to them and help integrate the (Syrian refugees), then the risks are very low. In fact, they're far more likely to help us root out those who are becoming radicalized here and abroad.”

Robyn McCall couldn't agree more.

A self-described “law-and-order type,” the 56-year-old McKeesport woman retired last year from her job as a senior official at the Allegheny County Jail.

McCall, the granddaughter of Syrian Christians who came here to escape persecution in the early 20th century, volunteered to help Motab, Sabha and their children when they arrived. She said she is boggled by people's fears of them.

“If you're really afraid of these six beautiful children blowing you up with a bomb, you shouldn't ever leave your home. You're too afraid of anything,” she told the Trib while cradling baby Iman.

“Instead of opposing these innocent people, you should work with us to assimilate them, like the Irish and Italians who came to Pittsburgh before them. Bring them into our fold. If my heart is big enough for these people, and my table is big enough for these people, then you should pull up a chair, too.”

McCall and her daughters routinely visit with the family, bringing gifts of winter coats, toys for the children and food. They also have become cultural ambassadors for Pittsburgh, introducing the family to Kennywood, Sandcastle and the closest thing the Iron City has to a Syrian souk: the Strip District.

“When they first got here, we couldn't communicate,” McCall said. “We literally played charades to communicate. That's when I began to realize how amazing they were. If you dropped me off today in Aleppo, it would take me 800 years to learn what they've learned in just months.”

Formerly a taxi driver in Aleppo, Motab now works for FedEx as a package sorter.

“I like to say that we help give families a hand up, not a handout,” said Leslie Aizenman, director of Refugee and Immigrant Services for the Jewish Family & Children's Service of Pittsburgh, the nonprofit that assisted Motab and his family when they arrived. “They have to go to work. And the jobs that they get mean that they're usually starting at the bottom.”

The State Department provides $1,100 per head in assistance when refugees arrive but nothing after that. Part of each paycheck goes to reimbursing the taxpayer for resettling his family.

Aizenman said many Syrians differ from other refugees because they believe the situation in their homeland is temporary and that they'll return when the war ends.

But Motab and Sabha told the Trib that they plan on becoming citizens over the next five years. Their kids already have discovered Spider Man, Tom and Jerry, and American football, and they believe in the American dream.

“I'm working at my very good job now. My son goes to school every day,” Motab said. “More people want to help me. I'm looking at myself as an American now.”

Carl Prine is a former investigative reporter at the Tribune-Review.