Introduction

As the world confronts an unprecedented forced migration crisis with over 65 million individuals displaced or seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2018), one of the most recent and well-known cases is Syria. Not only has the Syrian civil war produced a large number of forced migrants, the prospect of resettlement in third countries has resulted in a serious backlash against refugees in many parts of the world. This can be attributed to a number of factors – rising radicalization and terrorist attacks worldwide, increasing support for right wing political movements, xenophobia and Islamophobia in western countries, and various kinds of instability across the global system. While in many Western countries refugee resettlement and the acceptance of Syrian refugees has become controversial – and has often resulted in a narrowing of or ban on admissions – in Canada, the opposite is true.

The Canadian government committed to accepting 25,000 refugees in 2015 (Citizenship Canada, 2017) and having quickly reached that goal has gone on to accept a total of 54,560 Syrian refugees (Citizenship Canada, 2018). This report explores the parameters of this program to date, focusing on Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada over the past two years. Despite having a much smaller population and economy than the US, Canada has accepted significantly more Syrian refugees both per capita and nominally than its southern neighbor. What is the reason behind this dynamic? In this report we explore the motivation behind Canada's commitment to Syrian resettlement, the numbers and breakdown of Syrian refugees accepted, and its preliminary outcomes.

Reference Map

World's Current Largest Displaced Population

Since 2011, roughly 5.6 million people have fled Syria due to the ongoing civil war devastating the country, with an additional 6.6 million Syrians internally displaced (UNHCR, 2018). The large majority of those displaced are now residing in neighboring countries, primarily Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Only about 2.5% of Syrian refugees have been resettled to third countries between 2014 and 2018. Despite the number of registered refugees rising from 4.8 million at the end of 2016 to 5.6 million today, there was a 52% decrease in third country resettlement from 2016 to 2017 (UNHCR, 2018).
Canada's history of refugee resettlement in the modern era officially began in 1969, when Canada acceded to the United Nation's 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. In 1968, the Government of Canada developed a determination process for overseas officers to approve refugees for resettlement. The Immigration Act of 1976 defined refugees as a special class of immigrants and fully recognized the definition of a Convention refugee (Government of Canada, 2017). This act created much of Canada's refugee resettlement landscape that still exists today. However, due to its increasing complexity with thirty amendments, it was replaced in 2002 by Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) (ibid). The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program was created in 1978 as part of the 1976 Immigration Act. This original model was designed to allow refugees more individual care, increase Canada's resettlement capacity and further the public acceptance and understanding of refugees. However, in 2011, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (now Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada) amended the IRPA to impose a cap on privately sponsored refugee (PSR) applications and limit the origin countries of sponsored refugees (Voegeli, 2014). This amendment has since shifted the nature of the private sponsorship program by limiting the diversity inherent in the original program (ibid).

In 1989, the Immigration Act was amended to create a new refugee determination system and the Immigration and Refugee Board, part of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2017). Like other third country resettlement sites within the global refugee regime, Canadian acceptance rates have fluctuated over time largely in response to domestic and geopolitical interests (Ashutosh and Mountz, 2012; Reynolds and Hyndman, 2014).

The reflection of political priorities in Canadian refugee acceptance rates is not unusual and indeed parallels the policies of most other nation-states. The progressive (some would say ongoing) denial of asylum or refugee status to Syrians has often become a central theme in the political platforms of electoral candidates in the US and other European countries. These platforms are part of a broader trend of rising anti-immigrant discourse in many Western countries (Postelnicescu, 2016). Refugees and migrants have been a central issue in recent elections in Canada too. In a departure from many other Western countries, however, it was the acceptance of Syrian refugees that was associated with the electoral promises made by the governing Liberal Party of Canada in the 2015 federal election. There was in fact significant popular support for this initiative, as evidenced by the high participation rate of the general public in the private sponsorship program described below (CJPME, 2015).

Some of the official rationales given for Canada's acceptance of such a large number of Syrian refugees include altruism and the goal of increasing diversity within the receiving population (Trudeau, 2017). However, there appears to also be a degree of self-interest behind the decision; a report from Vancouver City Savings Credit Union predicts, for example, that the Syrian refugees resettled in Canada will produce economic value worth $563 million within 20 years (Vancity, 2015). The report indicates that refugees strengthen local economies and that the cost of services provided for initial resettlement is recouped by the long-term economic production of refugees’ children (ibid). These numbers suggest that while Canada may be driven by altruism, economic self-interest may also be a key element of government strategy (ibid).

Canada's current refugee system has two main programs: the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program and the In-Canada Asylum Program. The Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program has three sponsorship programs that are approved for resettlement of refugees from outside of Canada. The In-Canada Asylum Program serves those already within Canada seeking protection (Citizenship Canada, 2017).

Within these two programs, Canada categorizes incoming refugees into two classes. The first, the convention refugee abroad class, includes those who are outside their home country and may not return to their countries of origin due to persecution based on race, religion, political beliefs, nationality, or social identity (Citizenship Canada, 2017). Convention refugees can be sponsored by any of Canada's three programs. The country of asylum class includes refugees who are outside their home country and have been affected by a war or conflict or are denied basic human rights. Refugees of both classes must be referred by the UNHCR, a referral organization, or a private group (ibid).

The three sponsorship programs within the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program are the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) Program, the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program, and the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program.
The Government Assisted Refugee Program resettles convention refugees. These refugees are referred to IRCC visa officers by UNHCR or a foreign government (Elgersma, 2015). Once these refugees are selected, they undergo a series of medical, security, and criminality screenings. If the individual is deemed eligible to resettle, they will be prepared to leave for Canada by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or another organization. Depending on the country in which the refugee is leaving from, he or she may attend a Canadian Orientation Abroad pre-departure orientation session, facilitated by the IOM. The IOM will also accompany the individual to the airport for departure (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014).

Upon arrival in Canada, the individual will be met by staff from a refugee service provider organization (SPO). This staff will take the individual to a reception house or hotel as temporary accommodation until permanent housing can be found. The SPO will help the refugee with day to day tasks, language classes, and other training (ibid).

Government Assisted Refugees will receive funding through IRCC’s Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) for twelve months after arrival. The refugee will receive healthcare through Canada’s Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP), a healthcare system for refugees. This will provide basic, supplemental, and prescription drug coverage (Elgersma, 2015).

Refugees who require additional support and a longer settlement period are supported through the Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program. These refugees may be torture survivors, medically disabled, members of a large family, or experiencing systematic discrimination. Under this program, the government fully funds the refugee but works with private sponsors to provide additional settlement support (ibid).

GAR Resettlement Process

1) Medical, security, and criminality screening

2) IOM or another INGO prepare refugees for departure

3) SPO meets refugees at the airport, and brings them to temporary housing

4) IRCC’s RAP provides assistance for 12 months. Healthcare through IFHP

* Data provided by IRCC’s monthly updates

26,240
Syrian GARs settled as of 5/31/2018

48.1%

* Total GARs
* GARs

Syrian Refugee Resettlement In Canada | 2
The Blended Visa Office-Referred Program was created in 2013 (Elgersma, 2015) as part of the 2012 federal budget proposal. This program was meant to absorb 1,000 GAR resettlement spots in order to maintain the amount of refugees settled each year allowing for further involvement of the private sector (Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, 2017). Refugees accepted under this program have already been screened and prepped and thus will arrive in Canada within four months, much more quickly than refugees in other programs.

The Blended Visa Office-Referred Program resettles convention refugees referred to IRCC visa officers by the UNHCR. The departure process for BVOR refugees is the same as GARs (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014). Under the Blended Visa program, the government provides the first six months of funding and private sponsors then provide up to six months of funding. Private sponsors additionally fund travel and start-up costs and provide settlement support. Refugees in the Blended Visa program receive healthcare through the IFHP, with basic, supplemental and prescription drug coverage (Elgersma, 2015).

Refugees are referred to IRCC visa officers by private sponsors, but must provide documentation from the UNHCR or a foreign government that the individual has been registered as a refugee (Elgersma, 2015). The departure process is the same as for GARs and Blended Visa refugees. Upon arrival in Canada, the private sponsors will provide housing, clothing, food, furniture, employment search assistance, education enrollment, transportation, and emotional support for twelve months (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014). In 2017, the cost to settle one refugee was estimated to be around $13,500 between start-up costs (furniture, necessary items, food staples, clothing, first month's rent, etc.) and a year of financial support (Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, 2017).
Numbers and Mechanisms

As of May 31, 2018, Canada has accepted and resettled 54,560 Syrian refugees.

Syrian Refugees Resettled, Breakdown by Program *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government Assisted Refugees</td>
<td>26,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended-Visa Office Referred Refugees</td>
<td>4,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privately Sponsored Refugees</td>
<td>23,495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>54,560</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data provided by IRCC monthly updates, as of May 31, 2018.

According ISS of British Columbia, of the approximate 3,725 Syrian refugees placed in the province (2017):

- **26%** are under the age of 6
- **24%** are under the age of 12
- **11%** are between the ages of 13 and 18
Selection of Refugees

The Canadian government works in conjunction with the UNHCR to select eligible refugees. The UNHCR uses Refugee Status Determination (RSD) to determine the status of a displaced person as a refugee. While every UNHCR office must follow the standards set out in the Procedural Standards for RSD under UNHCR’s Mandate, published in 2005, each UNHCR office is required to ensure the quality of their services depending on the number of clients served (UNHCR, 2005). The Mandate addresses every aspect of the determination process. In this process, asylum seekers and refugees will approach the UNHCR office and undergo a reception process to assess their needs, refer them to the right procedure, and inform them of their rights. After their reception, the individual is then registered with the UNHCR (ibid). This registration provides the UNHCR with the information necessary to determine the individual’s status. The individual must also fill out the RSD Application Form. The registration is followed by an RSD interview, during which the individual may choose to have legal representation present. The UNHCR will then give the individual a date by which the RSD decision will be made (ibid).

For Canada to accept refugees referred by the UNHCR, the refugee needs to show the ability to economically and socially integrate within three to five years. Canada will not accept refugees that are coming directly from a country in which they would be safe. Canada will also not accept refugees that have been previously rejected by Canada, or refugees that have been accepted by another country (Government of Canada, 2011). Once the refugee has been referred, his or her application will be reviewed by an overseas Canadian visa officer. The applicant will undergo medical, security, and criminality screenings. If he or she does not successfully complete these screenings, he or she will not be selected for resettlement (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2014).

Canada prioritizes families, children, women at risk, and people considered to be sexual minorities. These refugees will then go to a Canadian office to receive a medical exam and security check and supply background information (Young, 2015). Syrian refugees are flown to Canada at the expense of the Canadian government, a support not offered to other refugees. After several more medical and security screenings, privately sponsored refugees are sent to their host community while federally funded refugees are matched with communities based on available necessary services (ibid).

The IRCC works individually with service providers to determine both funding amounts and which Syrian refugees to send to a given community. The service providers in a region work together through Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) Committees to fill gaps in provided services (ISS of BC, 2017). These committees are made up of stakeholders, partner agencies, service providers, and employers. Though these efforts have helped, there continues to be lack of communication between local providers due to competition for IRCC funding (ibid).

Refugee Services Breakdown

IRCC

Regional Service Providers

Local Immigration Partnership Committees

Stakeholders | Partner Agencies | Local Service Providers | Employers

Given the sudden influx of Syrian refugees to destination communities, service providers have been facing a number of challenges, among them a lack of housing. In cities like Vancouver, where housing is already limited, it can be challenging to find permanent housing for large Syrian families of six or more (ibid). This has led to service providers like ISS of BC to begin regionalization, a process that allows a major service provider to subcontract smaller agencies in order to resettle refugees outside of major destination communities. However, the farther refugees settle from major cities and the smaller the community in which they settle, the less services provided (ibid).
Preliminary Outcomes

01 | Employment

As of December 2016, Syrian refugees surveyed by Immigration, Citizenship and Refugee Canada reported fairly low employment rates, especially among government sponsored refugees. 90.3% of Syrian GARs and 47.2% of Syrian PSRs were not working at the time of the survey (Evaluation Division of the IRCC, 19). The majority of those working were employed in Sales and Services, as cashiers and kitchen helpers in grocery stores or restaurants (ibid). Others had found jobs in Trades and Transport, as construction workers, carpenters and the like (ibid, 20). Syrian GARs and PSRs have both reported not being sufficiently informed about their rights as workers (ibid, 18).

82% of Syrian GARs reported language to be their biggest barrier to employment (ibid, 20). Of incoming Syrian GARs, 83.2% reported no knowledge of either English or French (ibid, 16). Employment services require CLB 2 in either English or French, but given the large majority of Syrian GARs without knowledge of an official language, many are not referred to employment services (ibid, 19).

Privately sponsored Syrian refugees have relatively high employment rates. 52.8% of Syrian PSRs were working at the time of the survey (ibid). 59.2% of those not working were at the time actively looking for employment, but also reported language to be the biggest barrier to employment (ibid, 20).

While 90.8% of Syrian GARs are referred to language assessments (ibid, 17), they report that waiting lines for classes and lack of support are a barrier to language classes. Given the average size of Syrian refugee families, the lack of childcare provided by RAP means that many Syrians are unable to fully engage in language classes. 23.1% of Syrian GARs reported lack of childcare as a reason for not taking a language class (ibid, 18).

As mentioned above, 83.2% of Syrian GARs have no knowledge of official Canadian languages, versus 19% of Syrian PSRs. Thus, Syrian GARs have reported language to be their biggest challenge in integrating, whereas Syrian PSRs have reported employment to be their biggest challenge (ibid, 16).

02 | Language

Reasons Syrian Refugees are not Taking Language Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classes were full</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Childcare</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not need them</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not want them</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busy with other classes</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busy with work</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class located too far away</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconvenient times</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Evaluation Division of the IRCC, 2016)
Preliminary Outcomes

03 | Financial Assistance

Syrian refugees overwhelmingly reported that the twelve months of financial support was insufficient. Language and medical barriers meant that many Syrian GARs were unable to find employment during the first twelve months (ibid, 15).

For their first year in Canada, Syrian refugees are supported by either federal or private funds. Many refugees are reaching or have reached what is known as the 13th month, when this assistance is no longer provided. The federal government has worked with local organizations to make the transition as smooth as possible (Panesar, 2017). Many refugees, between 50 to 90 percent, will switch from the 12-month RAP support plan to public welfare within the 13th month (ibid). Despite fears of the burden this would place on the welfare system, the overall amount of people on welfare would only grow by 2.8 percent, even if every Syrian refugee in Canada began receiving welfare (ibid). Historically, 93% of government sponsored refugees have gone on after the first year to receive social assistance for at least a month. However, that number decreases to 34% after ten years. Only 25% of privately sponsored refugees used social assistance after the first twelve months (Evaluation Division of the IRCC, 26).

04 | Social & Cultural Integration

Most Syrian refugees see their integration into Canadian culture as successful. Half of Syrian GARs and 39.9% of Syrian PSRs reported being “very happy” in their new country, and 72.2% of Syrian GARs and 62.7% of Syrian PSRs felt a sense of belonging in Canada (ibid, 23). The majority of Syrian refugees feel comfortable with the daily tasks required for life in Canada, such as using transportation, finding a doctor, and enrolling in school. However, the rates at which they feel comfortable with these tasks are still lower than the rates of other refugee groups (ibid, 22).

05 | Quality of Services

Despite Canada’s extensive service provider network, the sudden influx of so many Syrian refugees means that the service provider organizations are unable to provide the usual quality of services (ibid, 9). Syrian PSRs were reported as receiving more information than GARs on how to file taxes, buy necessities, and find a doctor. Regardless, 74.9% of Syrian PSRs and 63.6% of GARs reported that their needs were met very soon after arriving (ibid, 11). However, the sheer number of Syrians entering Canada in a relatively small period of time has presented several challenges.

Dental hygiene, for example, one of the most pressing needs for Syrian refugees, is only partially covered under the Interim Federal Health Program. Service providers are not able to fully support this need, among other specific medical issues of arriving Syrians (ibid, 9). Service provider organizations are also not able to provide childcare while adults are receiving RAP programming. For Syrian families with multiple children, this can make it harder to attend RAP orientations. Children and teens are not given transportation allowances under RAP, adding more cost to Syrian families. Housing allowances often do not fully cover the price of rent. SPOs have also struggled with limited interpreters. As Syrian refugees continue to settle, SPOs predict having to overcome challenges with youth programming, which is not fully provided through current RAP (ibid, 28). They also predict that mental health will become a greater issue, but mental health services are currently lacking throughout Canada (ibid).
Conclusion

Despite its challenges, Canada's private sponsorship program is an important model to consider as the world faces new challenges in resettlement. The program not only promotes acceptance of refugees among citizens but increases Canada's resettlement capacity through innovative means. The social and community support refugees receive from private sponsorship promotes integration and accelerates the transition to self-sufficiency. As the preliminary studies on outcomes suggest, there are still many serious issues yet to be addressed, especially in smaller communities without the range of immigrant services that can be found in metropolitan regions such as Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto. Not being located in such areas or lacking adequate transportation, services or a previously established refugee community could make the transition for Syrians to life as Canadians more difficult.

Some have also criticized the Canadian government’s embrace of the private sponsorship model as potentially an abdication of its international obligations (as well as moral duty) to protect recognized refugees, as well as to aid in their effective integration into the broader society (Labman and Pearlman, 2018). Yet in the face of growing constraints on resettlement programs and an increase in anti-migrant policies worldwide, Canada’s innovative programs should be seen as holding significant promise. While only a small fraction of the world’s refugees are hosted in wealthier developed countries (UNHCR, 2018), there is the potential for the global community as a whole to do much more. In this vein, Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis is one for other developed countries to carefully examine and possibly emulate.

Maps of Syrian Resettlement in Canada

Government Sponsored Syrian Refugees

Privately Sponsored Syrian Refugees

Blended Visa Office-Referred Syrian Refugees

GAR Map Feature Count

- 0-250: 24
- 250-850: 10
- 850-1,750: 9
- 1,750-3,315: 3

PSR Map Feature Count

- 0-30: 47
- 30-100: 6
- 100-250: 8
- 250-400: 3
- 400-1,100: 4
- 1,100-8,880: 3

BVOR Map Feature Count

- 0-20: 41
- 20-50: 26
- 50-150: 12
- 150-350: 3
- 350-965: 1

References


References


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August 8, 2018

This report and further information on the Refugee Resettlement in Small Cities research project is available at: http://spatializingmigration.net/