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Syrian Refugees in Chicago: Examining Obstacles to Resettlement and the Role of the Syrian Community Network

by Sarah El Neweihi

(Geography 1105)

Introduction

The Syrian civil war, beginning in 2011 amidst the Arab Spring, has resulted in the widespread destabilization and destruction of the country, and has created the largest refugee crisis of our time. It has been estimated that almost half of the population of Syria has been displaced, creating a refugee population of over four million people.¹ These refugees are fleeing violence from multiple sources: the Bashar Al-Assad led Syrian Armed Forces, bombing by Western nations and Russia, as well as the atrocities committed by ISIS. While many have sought refuge in nearby Arab nations, these countries cannot shoulder the refugee burden alone. Thus, many Syrians have undertaken perilous journeys by sea to reach Europe, and some are finding their way to the United States and resettling in cities like Chicago. Syrian refugees face a number of political, social, and logistical obstacles in their attempts to start life anew in a foreign country, and they rely on the assistance of organizations focused on and aware of their specific needs. While there are many organizations helping to facilitate their transition, the group that distinguishes itself from the rest by being mainly composed of Syrians is the Syrian Community Network. The Syrian Community Network provides a special focus on the emotional well-being of newly arrived refugees, aiming to connect them with the local community to ease the difficulty of the transition to a new environment. This paper will explore the obstacles facing Syrian refugees arriving in Chicago and the services in place by the Syrian Community Network to assist them.

Overview of Syrian Refugees in Illinois

According to federal statistics provided to the Department of Human Services, 169 Syrian refugees have begun calling Illinois home since 2010, with most taking up residence in Chicago. The federal government provides the vast majority of funding to states for refugee relocation. Recent figures estimate the aid to Illinois at \$11 million annually. "An Associated Press analysis of state records shows that since 2012, Illinois has appropriated \$55 million in federal money for refugee services and spent \$33 million, or 60 percent of it."² Some state money is spent, but only through existing social services that an incoming family needs.

Obstacles of Resettlement

Uprooting one's entire life and attempting to restart and rebuild in an unfamiliar land is challenge enough on its own. However, in addition to the logistical difficulties of resettlement, Syrian refugees face backlash from U.S. politicians in an increasingly Islamophobic environment. In November, 2015, Bruce Rauner, governor of Illinois, was among more than half of U.S. governors

¹ Tony Briscoe and Angie L. Lourgos. "Syrian Refugees Find Rare Path to Chicago." *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 2015.

² Associated Press. "Rauner Faces Challenges in Move to Block Syrian Refugees." *Chicago Sun Times*, November 26, 2015.

who expressed hesitation at accepting Syrian refugees in their states. Despite the detailed screening process in place for incoming refugees, Rauner and many other, mostly Conservative governors, cited fears of those with ties to ISIS slipping through the cracks and posing a national security threat. These fears were amplified and reasserted after the terrorist attacks in Paris and Orlando, despite the fact that the perpetrators of these attacks were not Syrians. Other Illinois officials, like Rep. Tammy Duckworth have urged President Obama to take in up to 100,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016, a platform that was attacked by Senator Mark Kirk, claiming that terrorists have already entered the country through the refugee resettlement program.³ The dialogue has called into question the state's authority and ability to block refugees from entering their states. Under the Refugee Act of 1980, the authority for admitting refugees is granted to the President, but Rauner's office argues that federal law does provide the state an ability to "evaluate and revise the extent of their involvement in these programs at any time"⁴ For example, a governor may order a state agency to stop spending from any part of its budget, but it is unclear how an agency would be able to differentiate what dollars support refugees from which countries. However, as Fred Tsao of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights notes, not spending the allotted resettlement money could have consequences for the state receiving such funding in the future.⁵

Of course, while Rauner and others have decried accepting more refugees, there are those who maintain that the United States is not accepting its fair share of refugees from Syria, leaving Europe to carry the burden, despite the involvement the U.S. has had in the conflict. Mohammed Sahloul, a physician at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn, has treated patients in Syria, seen the destruction, and is disgusted by the U.S. response. "We don't have the moral authority to tell others to open their doors when we're not opening ours."⁶ President Obama has pledged to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees by October, 2016, in spite of xenophobic rhetoric from those like Presidential candidate Donald Trump. By the end of April, however, the State Department had only resettled 1,734 Syrian refugees, less than one-fifth of its goal.⁷ Those in favor of accepting refugees argue that accepting asylum seekers is a strategic tool to prevent radicalization of vulnerable communities. "There is no surer way to create a young terrorist than leave them to fester in an under-resourced refugee community," said Kathleen Newland of the Migration Policy."⁸ President Obama supported this notion, with his statement that accepting refugees is another way to win the war against ISIS.

We have to wield another weapon alongside our airstrikes, our military, our counterterrorism work, and our diplomacy, Obama said. And that's the power of our example. Our openness to refugees fleeing ISIL's violence. Our determination to win the battle against ISIL's hateful and violent propaganda — a distorted view of Islam that aims to radicalize young Muslims to their cause.⁷

³ Karoun Demirjian. "Sen. Mark Kirk Resurrects Bid to Block Syrian Refugee Admissions." *Chicago Tribune*, February 4, 2016.

⁴ Monique Garcia, Tony Briscoe, and Rick Pearson. "Rauner Halts Syrian Refugees in Illinois, Joins Wave of Governors." *Chicago Tribune*, November 17, 2015

⁵ Associated Press. "Rauner Faces Challenges in Move to Block Syrian Refugees."

⁶ Briscoe and Lourgou. "Syrian Refugees Find Rare Path to Chicago."

⁷ Susan Crabtree. "Obama Won't Budge on Syrian Refugees Even after Orlando." *The Gazette*, June 14, 2016.

⁸ Steve Chapman. "Why We Should Take More Syrian Refugees." *Chicago Tribune*, September 11, 2015.

However, even if everyone was on board for accepting more refugees, there is no guarantee that the refugees will pass the detailed and intensive screening process in place.

Refugees undergo by far the most rigorous level of security checks required of any traveler to the United States, National Security Council spokesman Myles Caggins said. Syrian refugees are screened to an even higher standard. These checks involve multiple U.S. agencies, including the Departments of State and Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, The National Counterterrorism Center, the Terrorist Screening Center, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community.⁷

Hakam Subh, a Syrian refugee residing in Chicago since April, 2015, recalls that it took more than two years from the time he applied for refugee status to the time he learned he was on his way to America, and this is not unusual, with the process taking even longer for others. Subh and his wife were intensely questioned, separately, multiple times. Twice in six months he was required to detail his family history and why he wanted to leave.⁹ In fact, there is much more incentive for an immigration officer to refuse entry than grant it.

If there is even a whiff of a security concern, no consular officer or security officer (from the multitude of U.S. agencies vetting applicants) wants to be the one that has his name on the bottom of a form where someone turns out to have done something horrible, Frelick (Human Rights Watch) said of the asylum-seekers from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other Muslim countries in conflict. There is every incentive to say no and very few incentives to say yes. This stigma of terrorism, the fear of a needle in the haystack, tends to hold the whole haystack back.¹⁰

If a refugee is lucky enough to pass the screening process and actually make it to their destination, there are still an overwhelming amount of logistical obstacles awaiting them. Housing, schooling for youth, employment, clothing, language barriers, etc. are just a few of the aspects of resettlement that must be addressed. Those who may have held respectable positions in Syria find themselves holding a lower status in their new communities. Firas Jawish, a refugee who has been in Chicago since 2014, was a doctor in Syria and now makes ends meet in a data entry position. Refugee children have their own unique dilemma, to fit in with children who look, speak, and act differently from them. “My younger son doesn’t have many friends in school because he can’t speak good English,” Dua Lababide, a 27-year-old mother of two, said in Arabic. Lababide came to Chicago about ten months ago.”¹¹ Fortunately, there are a number of nonprofit organizations in place specifically designed to resettle refugees in Chicago, including those who cater to Syrian refugees in particular. One such organization is the Syrian Community Network (SCN).

⁹ Associated Press. "Rauner Faces Challenges in Move to Block Syrian Refugees."

¹⁰ Briscoe and Lourgos. "Syrian Refugees Find Rare Path to Chicago."

¹¹ Nikita Mandhani. "Syrian Refugees Struggle with American Schools." February 24, 2016. Medill News Service.

Syrian Community Network

The Syrian Community Network is a non-profit organization founded by Syrian immigrant, Suzanne Akhras Sahloul, that supplements efforts in helping Syrian refugees adjust to life in Chicago. What distinguishes SCN from other organizations is that it aims to bridge the gap between newly arrived refugees and local Chicago communities. Its main goals are: to partner with other refugee resettlement agencies in providing support to Syrian refugees, to connect refugees with appropriate services and community resources, to foster a relationship between Syrian refugees and the larger Chicago community, and to establish cultural competency for staff working with Syrian refugees as well as for Syrians, learning about American culture for the first time.¹² SCN is especially sensitive to the emotional needs of newly arrived refugees, feeling overwhelmed by their situation.

Refugees are challenged with an overwhelming amount of emotions as they come in. Not only are they forced to leave their homes and their belongings not knowing if they will ever return, but they now are entering a new place they must call home. This new home may be a place very unfamiliar to them in terms of language and customs. Furthermore, rather than having time to adjust to these changes, they are forced to quickly find a way to provide income for their homes and families not knowing who they can trust or who they can turn to for support.¹²

Although SCN offers essential services such as English Language courses, job training and placement, and skill building trainings, it often seeks to supplement these services, which are generally managed by larger organizations such as Refugee One. As the organization is largely comprised of Syrians, it provides cultural sensitivity training for case workers in other organizations, educates them about the situation in Syria, and provides translation services. SCN is also unique because it teams up with other agencies to serve as mentors to their clients. “For these families, nothing could be a more welcoming homecoming than receiving frequent and consistent visits from an individual or family who descends from the same roots, speaks the same language, and who can offer advice and awareness on living options and community services.”¹³ The relationship between these mentors and the families are meant to be long-lasting, providing a sense of stability, something most of the refugee families have not had for years. For example, not only does SCN help facilitate translations for parent teacher conferences at refugee children’s schools, they also attend graduations and remain involved in the families’ lives. Hadia Zarzour, a volunteer and professional counselor with SCN, notes that many people don’t stop to think about the horrible ordeals these families have been through.

I know what they've witnessed, those traumatic events, seeing their dad killed, losing their home, losing their town, their friends, their family members and here we're talking about helping them with language, helping them finding jobs, helping them feel that they have their agency over their lives, because everything was taken away. Nobody chooses to be a refugee. It's just forced on them.¹⁴

¹² Syrian Community Network.

¹³ Syrian Community Network.

¹⁴ Nicole Grether and Lisa Fletcher. "How One Syrian Refugee Family in Chicago Is Struggling for a Safe Future." *Al Jazeera America*, September 21, 2015.

One of the families assisted by SCN is the Adris family. Fatima Adris, along with her husband and two young sons, have been in Roger's Park for almost two years. She fled her home in Homs, Syria after her father and brother were killed by Assad forces. After first fleeing to Lebanon, Adris applied for refugee status through the UN, and after fourteen months of interviews, background checks, and waiting, she was accepted in the United States. Her eldest son attends CPS and her husband was placed in a job at Wal-Mart. SCN has connected the Adris family with other refugee families, as well as assisted with rent payments. "She says the hardest part was knowing that she'd likely never see the rest of her family again. But she says the community she has discovered in West Rogers Park has begun to fill that void."¹⁵ In fact, SCN founder Sahloul notes that many of the restaurants and small businesses on the North side were founded by refugees. Furthermore, thanks to job placement programs, many refugees have found success in companies willing to hire them, like Eli's Cheescake, where refugees make up fifteen percent of the work force. Marc Schulman, son of the founder of Eli's, says he would happily employ more Syrian refugees.¹⁶

The Syrian Community Network is also there when disaster strikes. When a fire in their Rogers Parks apartment complex uprooted the Elaly family for the fourth time in four years, Sahloul started a GoFundMe campaign that earned the family over \$6,000 in a few days.¹⁷ The Chicago community has supported refugees in other ways, as well. College of DuPage Art Professor Jennifer Hereth hosted a show entitled, "Refugee" which featured photos of Syrian refugees. All of the proceeds were donated to the families, in coordination with SCN.¹⁸ Families like that of Fatima Adris report that people have been very welcoming in Chicago and very friendly.

Conclusion

With no end in sight to the conflict in Syria, the refugee crisis is only going to worsen before it improves. With two presidential candidates who have very opposing views on immigration and foreign policy, the United States' upcoming role in the crisis remains unclear. Nonetheless, the Syrian refugees who have arrived face a multitude of obstacles beyond the political, including adjusting to an entirely different culture, language, and environment. Chicago's official response to Syrian refugees coming to the city has been mixed, but generally, the people on the ground have been welcoming, and organizations like the Syrian Community Network have made an incredibly difficult situation a little easier for the people seeking shelter in their city.

¹⁵ Paris Schutz. "Should Chicago Accept More Syrian Refugees?" WTTW. September 14, 2015.

¹⁶ Kane Farabaugh. "Chicago Business Finds Success in Refugee Employment." Voice of America, June 3, 2016.

¹⁷ Linze Rice and Josh McGhee. "Syrian Refugees Lose Everything in Rogers Park Fire, Locals Step Up To Help." January 14, 2016. Dnainfo.

¹⁸ Susan Dibble. "Art Exhibit to Benefit Local Syrian Refugees." *Daily Herald*, May 17, 2016.

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