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Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada:  
An auto-ethnographic account of sponsorship

Jona Zyfi  
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# SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN CANADA: AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF SPONSORSHIP

JONA ZYFI

MA CANDIDATE IN CRIMINOLOGY, CENTRE FOR CRIMINOLOGY AND SOCIOLEGAL STUDIES,  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Having fled my own homeland when I was a child, migration and refugee law and policy is a topic close to my heart. These personal experiences led me to pursue research focusing on the growing criminalization of forced migrants and asylum seekers as part of my graduate studies. Coupled with my involvement in the community and the Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS) I was eager to be part of a team that would sponsor a Syrian refugee family to Canada through *Lifeline Syria*. My personal experiences and worldviews related to migrants and refugees are important to acknowledge as it impacts my analysis relating to the sponsorship process.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite its massive scale, the international community has been less than forthcoming in sharing the burden<sup>1</sup> of the refugee crisis. Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan are hosting the majority of Syrian refugees, but with little prospect of short- or medium-term repatriation, they are facing political, social, and economic turmoil about ways forward. For example, Turkey has already spent over 6 billion USD hosting refugees, and is making some progress towards providing full legal rights entitled to refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention by issuing work permits.<sup>2</sup> However, the effort has largely been initiated as a strategy to discourage further travel towards the European borders. Likewise, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): The UN Refugee Agency in 2015 requested 362.5 million USD for its basic operations; but, by September 2015, only 40% of the required financial assistance had been transferred from the international community.<sup>3</sup> Also, the World Food Program was forced to reduce food vouchers to Syrians in Lebanon by

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<sup>1</sup> Burden-sharing refers to the need for sharing responsibility for protection of refugees between States. The concept of international burden sharing in relation to refugees has been present since the inception of the UNHCR which can be found in Paragraph 4 of the Preamble of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. It expressly acknowledges that “the grant of asylum may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries, and that a satisfactory solution of a problem of which the United Nations has recognized the international scope and nature cannot therefore be achieved without international cooperation.” Proposals of burden-sharing can include distributing refugees amongst States according to GDP, land mass, or population size.

<sup>2</sup> Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan and Susan Fratzke, “Europe’s Migration Crisis in context: Why Now and What Next?”, The Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute (2015) <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/europe-migration-crisis-context-why-now-and-what-next>; “Merkel lauds Turkey for issuing work permits to refugees”, Anadolu Agency, April 24, 2016 <http://aa.com.tr/en/turkey/merkel-lauds-turkey-for-issuing-work-permits-to-refugees/560284>

<sup>3</sup> Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan and Susan Fratzke, “Europe’s Migration Crisis”.

half.<sup>4</sup> While all categories of the UN appeal are underfunded, support for livelihoods development have been particularly low, in turn affecting the long-term vulnerability in host countries.

In fact, with the exception of Europe and the United States, financial support for Syrian refugees has been weak. Amidst the Gulf countries, Kuwait has been the leading country to make a significant financial contribution. Japan has been the only state in Asia or South America to come forward.<sup>5</sup> Even traditional resettlement countries such as Canada and Australia have done very little, both financially and in regards to resettlement. The UNHCR reported that in 2014, it only managed to resettle less than 1% of the global refugee population.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is not hard to see why humanitarian efforts have generally been criticized. It seems that the West has undertaken a “closed door, open wallet”<sup>7</sup> policy, choosing to provide monetary support despite it leading to refugees simply being warehoused and in limbo in countries such as Turkey, instead of focusing on broadening resettlement programs, or meaningful long-term, sustainable solutions.

When refugees are not able to return home and have no opportunities of integration into countries of first asylum, resettlement is a solution that offers protection to the most vulnerable. Canada’s private refugee sponsorship program has enabled Canadians to offer support, protection and a new home to refugees since 1979.<sup>8</sup> Through private sponsorships, citizens can assist in increasing the number of refugees that can be resettled to Canada. It also helps relieve pressures on countries which are providing asylum to large numbers of refugees and serves to reunite families torn by conflict. Emulating Canada’s response to the Indochinese Refugee Movement of 1979<sup>9</sup>, *Lifeline Syria* aims to assist in the process of private sponsorship.

By joining *Lifeline Syria*, my team and I (Team Amalya) are acknowledging that the Syrians fleeing for their lives did not choose violence. They did not want to uproot themselves from their beloved homes or disrupt their children’s lives. Hunger, war and persecution have been the daily reality of these refugees, many of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2015. World at War: Global Trends, Forced Displacement in 2014. Geneva: UNHCR, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas A.R. Fraser, (presentation, Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies Student Panel Discussion, January 29, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), “Private Sponsorship of Refugees”, <http://ccrweb.ca/en/private-sponsorship-refugees>

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Cukier, “We can all do more for Syrian refugees”, The Toronto Star, September 3, 2015, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2015/09/03/we-can-all-do-more-for-syrian-refugees.html>



whom are children. Hence, we are participating in *Lifeline Syria* because we do not want to become bystanders; and we believe that everyone deserves to feel safe and realize his or her full potential.

The aim of this paper is to provide an auto-ethnographic reflection of Canada's private sponsorship program and *Lifeline Syria*'s efforts to resettle Syrian refugees. Whilst providing a practical perspective of the private sponsorship process, this paper will highlight the Canadian private sponsorship process, as well as related policies and practices. Part 1 will provide a brief overview of the Syrian refugee crisis. Part 2 will explore Canada's efforts and progress in resettling Syrian refugees thus far; and discuss the details of the Canadian five-phase refugee resettlement plan. Part 3 will describe the types of sponsorship programs available in Canada. Lastly, part 4 will provide an overview of *Lifeline Syria* and an auto-ethnographic analysis from my personal experiences as one of the sponsoring leads for "Team Amalya", a group privately sponsoring a Syrian family through *Lifeline Syria*.

## CONTEXT: WHERE ARE THE MAJORITY OF SYRIAN REFUGEES?

Article 13 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to freedom of movement within and across borders of each State.<sup>10</sup> Today, unprecedented numbers of people are being denied access to this fundamental freedom. War, conflict, persecution, and disaster have displaced at least 59.5 million people worldwide, the highest number on record.<sup>11</sup> Globally, there are an additional 38.2 million internally displaced persons and 19.5 million refugees.<sup>12</sup> In 2014 alone, 11 million people were newly displaced within the borders of their own country.<sup>13</sup> This figure is the equivalent of 30,000 fleeing each day.<sup>14</sup> In fact, 60% of these new displacements took place in only five countries, namely, Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>15</sup> More than 53% of people displaced outside the borders of the state of citizenship originate from Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia.<sup>16</sup> Further, and contrary to popular

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<sup>10</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc. A/ 810 at 71 (1948)

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, *World at War*, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *Global Overview 2015: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence* (Geneva: IDMC and Norwegian Refugee Council, 2015), p.7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

belief, developing regions host 86% of the world's refugees.<sup>17</sup> Turkey is now the largest refugee hosting country, followed by Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, and Jordan.<sup>18</sup>

Syria's civil war is the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. As of February 2016, 7.6 million people are internally displaced, 4.7 million are registered as refugees worldwide, and a further 13.5 million need humanitarian assistance.<sup>19</sup> More than 4 million Syrians have found safety in neighbouring countries, with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan hosting 90% of the global Syrian refugee population.<sup>20</sup> Constituting 51% of the global refugee population, with half of this population being children, the devastation is likely to ripple out across generations.<sup>21</sup> Not only has their schooling been disrupted, but also the children are confronting psychological trauma, homelessness, malnutrition, exploitation, forced recruitment into various military groups, and even death. The U.N. and World Vision report that the effect the war has had on Syrian children has reversed the educational progress by 10 years.<sup>22</sup>

## CANADA'S EFFORTS AND PROGRESS

Stephen Harper's Conservative Government promised to admit 1,300 Syrian refugees by the end of 2014 with 200 being government assisted<sup>23</sup>. This promise addressed only 0.02% of the total number of Syrian refugees at the time. However, despite the small number, the then-majority government did not meet their goal until March 2015.<sup>24</sup> It is also important to note that the vast majority of the refugees resettled were through private sponsorship.

The new Liberal Government that came to power in November 2015 made a public commitment to achieve resettlement for 25,000 Syrian refugees by December 2015<sup>25</sup>, later revised for practical purposes to 10,000

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Syrian Arab Republic," <http://www.unocha.org/syria>; UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response," <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR, *World at War*, p.3.

<sup>22</sup> OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic"

<sup>23</sup> Government assisted refugees are Convention Refugees abroad whose resettlement is entirely sponsored by the Government of Canada or the province of Quebec.

<sup>24</sup> Nick Logan, "Reality Check: How do Harper's Syrian refugee numbers add up?" *Global News*, August 10, 2015

<http://globalnews.ca/news/2157321/reality-check-do-harpers-syrian-refugee-numbers-add-up>

<sup>25</sup> Joe Friesen, "Liberals fall short of year-end goal for refugee resettlement", *The Globe and Mail*, December 31, 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/two-more-weeks-needed-to-bring-10000-syrian-refugees-to-canada-liberals/article27970929/>

by year's end but with the overall goal remaining the same.<sup>26</sup> The first plane with 163 privately sponsored refugees arrived in Toronto on 10 December and the first chartered flight with 214 Syrians arrived on 15 December 2015.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the Liberal Government will honour the previous government's commitment to match private donations up to \$100 million, plus an additional 100 million CDN donation to the UNHCR. Further, a \$5 million pledge to assist Syrian refugees resettling in Canada was made in December. Canada has hitherto welcomed 27,005 Syrian refugees from November 2015 until May 8, 2016,<sup>28</sup> An additional 2,813 applications have been finalized, and are awaiting travel to Canada and 16,167 resettlement applications are currently in progress.<sup>29</sup> These applications are primarily from Lebanon, followed by Jordan and Turkey.

## THE FIVE-PHASE CANADIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PLAN

In an attempt to take immediate action while protecting the safety, security, and health of Canadians and refugees, the Canadian government created a national five-phase plan called “#WelcomeRefugees”.<sup>30</sup> The plan aims to identify, select and process, transport, welcome and resettle Syrian refugees to their new homes and communities. During phase one<sup>31</sup>, Canadian officials work closely with the UNHCR – the agency overseeing the identification and reintegration of refugees in Jordan and Lebanon - to identify Syrian refugees for resettlement to Canada. In the case of Turkey, refugees are registered with the State, but the process is similar to the one in Jordan and Lebanon. Canada has asked the UNHCR to prioritize low security risk vulnerable refugees such as women, complete families, and individuals identifying as LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex).

Phase Two is the processing of Syrian refugees. Once refugees are identified, the UNHCR contacts them *via* text messages to ask if they are interested in being resettled to Canada. If they say yes, the UNHCR then confirms their identity using an iris scan, and refers them to Canadian officials for processing at the visa offices. Approximately 500 Canadian immigration officials were sent to staff the Canadian offices in Amman, Beirut and Istanbul, and are responsible for interviewing refugees and processing their applications to resettle in Canada. Selected applicants then undergo a number of examinations, including mandatory medical

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), “#WelcomeRefugees: Milestone and key figures,” <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/milestones.asp>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> CIC, “#WelcomeRefugees”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



screenings for communicable diseases such as tuberculosis. Medical examinations must be conducted by an approved physician. In the event that a medical concern arises, such as active tuberculosis, the person must be treated before travel. A refugee's resettlement application cannot be rejected as a result of medical conditions<sup>32</sup>. Instead, the conditions will be flagged for follow-up in Canada. However, this can delay the overall process of resettlement.

Additional examinations include a security screening to collect and to verify biographical information, as well as biometrics such as fingerprints and digital photos. Refugees are also checked for warrants and criminality through Interpol. In the event that the security screening raises concerns, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) conducts additional interviews to investigate. This can delay the application process for up to 24 months<sup>33</sup>. Admissibility checks also include an assessment of whether they have family members or friends in Canada, their ability to speak or learn English or French, and their potential for employment and resourcefulness. All of this information is crosschecked against immigration, law enforcement, and security databases.

All members of an applying family unit are assessed as a single determination. Also, it is worthy to note that refugees deemed in urgent need of protection or in vulnerable circumstances are not assessed on their ability to establish in Canada. Upon completion of the screening process, refugees are provided with permanent resident visas, a process that is conducted overseas and could take several months.

Phase 3 is travel to Canada. Once all conditions are met, Canadian immigration officials refer the refugee family to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or another organization hired by the Canadian Government to help prepare them for their journey. Such preparations include booking the plane ticket, escorting them to the airport and assisting in checking in their luggage or meeting any other needs at the airport. In some countries, refugees are invited to attend a pre-departure Canadian orientation session, which is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and implemented by IOM. If a refugee family is being privately sponsored, the IOM notifies the sponsoring group prior to the refugees' travel. In the event that the refugees do not have passports or other travel documents, Canadian government officials provide temporary

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<sup>32</sup> Joe Friesen, "Liberals fall short"

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

travel documents. Prior to travel, all refugees are screened by the Canadian Border Service Agency (CBSA) once again before they depart for Canada. For the most part they are transported by privately chartered planes, and all refugees arrive in Toronto or Montreal for processing.

The costs of travel and medical examinations are covered through a loan from the Canadian government. This loan will have to be paid back within 30 days of arriving in Canada. However, an evaluation of a comparative program for refugee loans between 2003-2012 revealed that no one had managed to start paying back their loan within the first 30 days.<sup>34</sup> The loans can be up to 10,000 CDN<sup>35</sup> with the CIC reporting the average is around 3,000 CDN<sup>36</sup>. The exact amount is dependent on the size of the family and the time of travel. It is also crucial to note that, if the loan is not paid back within 1-3 years, the refugee is charged interest at a 2015 rate of 1.38%.<sup>37</sup> Such a situation leaves many refugees starting their new lives in debt. Indebtedness undermines capabilities to integrate and contribute meaningfully to Canada; it also increases levels of stress and stigma, particularly for Muslim communities.<sup>38</sup> Although Immigration Minister John McCallum stated that the government would be revising this policy, no announcements have yet been publicized.<sup>39</sup> Local actions at alleviating the debts on refugees include the Surrey City Council in British Columbia adopting a resolution calling for the eradication of these loans,<sup>40</sup> and the Vancity Credit Union in Vancouver, British Columbia, offering interest-free travel loans to refugees by buying out the Government loans.<sup>41</sup> While these are all progressive steps, concerns about how the level of need for each family can be assessed if the Government was to instead provide flat subsidies remain. Alternatively, the sponsorship family may help pay this loan back with the money they have fundraised; or explicitly budget for travel expenses. This point will be revisited in the discussion on the private sponsorship process.

Phase 4 is arrival to Canada. On landing in Canada, refugees become permanent residents. CBSA once again screens all refugees to provide a final identity verification. New arrivals are also screened for illnesses as per the Quarantine Act (2005) and necessary treatment is provided. Those who are privately sponsored meet

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<sup>34</sup> CBC News, "Canada's 'cruel' refugee loans leave non-Syrian newcomers with growing debt, say advocates,"

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/refugee-loans-canada-1.3378573>

<sup>35</sup> Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), "Refugee Transportation Loans," <http://ccrweb.ca/en/transportation-loans>

<sup>36</sup> CBC News, "Canada's refugee loans"

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Jennifer Hyndman and James McLean, "Settling Like a State: Acehnese Refugees in Vancouver", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, 3 (2006): 345-360.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> CCR, "Refugee Transportation Loans"

<sup>41</sup> CBC News, "Canada's refugee loans"

their hosts and continue to the community of the private sponsor. For GARs, some will continue to predetermined communities while others will be provided with temporary accommodation if a community has yet to be assigned.

The final phase is settlement and reintegration. It includes providing refugees with settlement supports such as access to healthcare, permanent housing, counseling, English as a Second Language (ESL) services, schooling and support services. Support for GARs is provided by the federal government, refugees arriving in Quebec are supported by the province, and privately-sponsored refugees are supported by their respective sponsors.

The process from one phase to the next takes months, and many refugees never make it to Phase 3. The reason why Phase 3 is the trickiest to pass is not related so much to the medical exams, but to the impossibility of producing required documentation. Among many documents, birth certificates are literally impossible to get. Many have no family or contact with anyone in Syria, and even if they did, considering the state of the country one can imagine how hard it would be to attain such documents and have them mailed to Turkey or Lebanon, or wherever else they might be located at the time. Another obstacle pertains to refugees identifying as LGBTQI in particular because sexual orientation is a nebulous construct that is difficult to document.

## BRINGING A SYRIAN REFUGEE TO CANADA: WHAT OPTIONS ARE AVAILABLE?

The Canadian refugee system has two main parts, namely, the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program for people seeking protection from outside Canada; and the In-Canada Asylum Program for people making claims for refugee protection from within Canada.<sup>42</sup> Under the former category, CIC administers three broad sponsorship programs for refugees who may never be able to return to their homelands. These are the government assisted refugee (GAR) program, the blended visa office-referred (BVOR) program and private sponsorship. Discussing the In-Canada Asylum Program and all three sponsorship programs and their sub-categories under the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this section will provide only a brief overview of the (GAR) program and the BVOR, while primarily focusing on the private sponsorship process.

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<sup>42</sup> CIC, "The refugee system in Canada," <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/canada.asp>

## GOVERNMENT ASSISTED REFUGEE (GAR) PROGRAM

Refugees sponsored through the GAR program<sup>43</sup> are Convention Refugees Abroad whose resettlement is entirely sponsored by the Government of Canada or the province of Quebec. The process takes at least 6 months per applicant. The necessary support services are delivered by NGOs who are supported by CIC. The government will provide up to 12 months of financial support upon arrival in Canada, or until the GAR is able to support themselves, whichever occurs first. During this time, the Government covers the costs of medical services, provides housing, food, clothing, employment help and any other required resettlement assistance. The typical person of contact for settlement assistance is a staff member from an immigrant service provider organization that has made prior arrangements with the government to help in the reintegration process. In essence, each GAR is provided with a monthly allowance to assist with food, clothing, furniture and day-to-day expenses in addition to the monthly allowance dedicated to cover accommodation costs. All other needs such as ESL classes, daycare and any other services required are provided through the assigned service provider organization. Each GAR is resettled in a designated city with available settlement and community services to offer support. Thus, one cannot choose the city they want to live in from the start. While they are free to move somewhere else within Canada, it is strongly encouraged to not do so for the first year because of estrangement from critical service providers. As of May 1, 2016, Canada has welcomed 15,244 refugees through the GAR program.<sup>44</sup>

## BLENDED VISA OFFICE-REFERRED (BVOR) PROGRAM

Launched in 2013, the aim of this program<sup>45</sup> is to create a three-way partnership amongst the Government of Canada, the UNHCR, and private sponsors. UNHCR identifies refugees and matches them through CIC with a private sponsor, - typically a so-called sponsorship agreement holder (SAH). SAHs are religious, ethnic, community or service organizations that have signed sponsorship agreements with the Canadian Government to help support refugees from abroad when they resettle in Canada on an ongoing basis. There are roughly 90 SAHs in Canada<sup>46</sup> who are already approved by the government to sponsor refugees themselves or work with

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<sup>43</sup> CIC, "Government-Assisted Refugee Program," <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/outside/resettle-gov.asp>

<sup>44</sup> CIC, "#WelcomeRefugees"

<sup>45</sup> CIC, "Blended Visa Office-Referred Program-Sponsoring refugees," <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/vor.asp>

<sup>46</sup> Joe Friesen, "Refugee sponsorship can be a long, complex process – here's how it works," *The Globe and Mail*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/refugee-sponsorship-can-be-a-long-complex-process---heres-how-it-works/article26323043/>

others in the community to sponsor refugees. Many SAHs play integral roles in the private sponsorship program, especially through *Lifeline Syria*.

Under the BVOR program, the Government provides up to 6 months of financial support upon arrival to Canada through the Resettlement Assistance Program. In practice, however, we are seeing that this financial support typically lasts for only 4 months. The refugee is also matched with a group of five private sponsors who have agreed to help with the resettlement process. The private sponsors are required to provide financial support for the remaining 6-8 months, as well as social and emotional support and assistance with settlement needs for the first full year.

Families identified for the BVOR program are typically regarded as complicated cases. Generally, these families tend to be extended, including grandparents, uncles, aunts or cousins, and/or include members who require special assistance. Interestingly, profiles of refugees under this category are only available for 14 days. In the event that they do not get matched, the application continues through to the GAR program.

Other sponsorship programs<sup>47</sup> available include: the Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) program which aims to resettle refugees with special needs; the Women at Risk (WAR) program which includes cases of women whose lives are at risk and for whom urgent protection is needed; and the Urgent Protection Program (UPP) for those who are under immediate threat to be returned home, expelled or facing direct threats to life. All three of these programs fall under the GAR sponsorship category. The JAS program is slightly unique as refugees under this program receive support from the Government and a private sponsor for up to 36 months, depending on the case.<sup>48</sup> Also, UPP cases are designated as GARs and some may be identified as JAS cases. Under the urgent programs (WAR and UPP) refugees do not have to show that they have potential settlement potential; however, they must pass medical, security and criminality requirements.

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<sup>47</sup> For additional information see <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/applications/private.asp>

<sup>48</sup> CIC, "Joint Assistance Program – Sponsoring refugees with special needs", <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/jas.asp>

## PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP

The private sponsorship<sup>49</sup> process can take several forms. One route is to apply to become a private sponsor directly to the Government. This can be a complicated and tedious process, requiring many forms and security checks. All private sponsors are (i) a SAH; (ii) a group of five Canadians or permanent residents who have proactively come together for this purpose; or (iii) a community sponsor, such as local organizations, associations, or corporations. The second route, which is what my team and I have done and what most people are doing right now, is to apply through *Lifeline Syria*. Before delving into the details of *Lifeline Syria* and my personal experiences with sponsorship, it is important to highlight how the matching process works.

The matching process can take one of two forms. First, sponsor referrals means the sponsoring group suggests the name of a refugee or refugee family for resettlement who are typically referred by friends and relatives already resident in Canada. Second, sponsors can approach the matching centre at CIC in Ottawa which maintains an inventory of already pre-approved Syrian refugees ready for travel. Depending on sponsors' amount of financial resources, matching can be made with an individual or family on the list.

## WHAT IS LIFELINE SYRIA?

Building on the success of *Operation Lifeline* 37 years earlier - an organization which was formed to help resettle Indochinese refugees to Canada - *Lifeline Syria* is focused on resettling refugees from the current Syrian civil war. Working with community organizations, private sponsorship groups through *Operation Lifeline* helped resettle more than 60,000 refugees in a matter of months.<sup>50</sup> In turn, the Government at the time dramatically increased their resettlement quota. In a similar model, *Lifeline Syria* collaborates with local settlement agencies, religious groups, refugee services, and most importantly, local citizens and community leaders, many from Ryerson University to recruit, train and assist private refugee sponsor groups. Aiming to resettle at least 1,000 refugees in the Greater Toronto Area, *Lifeline Syria* matches newcomers with private sponsors who assist with resettlement and creates bridges to the wider receiving community.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> CIC, "Guide to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program," <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/ref-sponsor/section-2.asp>

<sup>50</sup> Wendy Cukier, "We can all do more"

<sup>51</sup> Lifeline Syria, "Our work," <http://lifelinesyria.ca/ourwork/>



As of May, 2016 there are 422 private sponsor groups registered with *Lifeline Syria* and a total of 2410 registered individual sponsors. These include chapters from Ryerson University, York University, University of Toronto, and the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) respectively.<sup>52</sup> Thus far, Ryerson has been the most successful of the universities with 75 sponsoring teams and more than 300 student volunteers sponsoring a total of 300 refugees to come to Canada.<sup>53</sup> Upper-year student volunteers<sup>54</sup> are assigned to teams based on the specialized support they can offer stemming from their area of study or personal experience. Volunteer teams include: health and wellness, settlement, finance, political engagement, translation and interpretation and the welcoming committee.<sup>55</sup>

*Lifeline Syria* mostly assists Syrian refugees who have family or friends in Canada. Sponsorship through *Lifeline Syria* has many benefits that make the process more streamlined and efficient. It is worth noting that the majority of matches through *Lifeline Syria* are cases that have been referred by family and friends in Canada. *Lifeline Syria* also receives cases through the BVOR program and the CIC matching centre; however, these are few in number, have higher needs, and require increased settlement involvement. Also, the sponsorship process is the same whether you choose to go through a university or not.

A sponsorship with *Lifeline Syria* typically takes 6-12 months, however families identified as high needs may be resettled in as little as 2-4 months.<sup>56</sup> The sponsorship groups need to be composed of at least five core members over the age of 18 who have some financial means, no criminal record and reside in the community where the refugees will settle. Sponsorship groups are also required to raise a minimum of \$27,000<sup>57</sup> for a family of four. This figure is roughly equivalent to social assistance payments and it needs to last the family for their first year in Canada. The cost increases roughly \$2,500<sup>58</sup> for each additional family member depending on their age. Recall that refugees have to pay back their travel and medical examination loans to the Government. While sponsorship groups are not responsible for helping pay this back - unless they have co-signed loans for any debt that a refugee incurs in Canada - some groups may choose to do so.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ryerson University, "Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge," <http://www.ryerson.ca/lifelinesyria/about/index.html>

<sup>54</sup> To become a student volunteer for Ryerson Lifeline Syria visit [www.ryerson.ca/lifelinesyria/](http://www.ryerson.ca/lifelinesyria/)

<sup>55</sup> Ryerson University, "Lifeline Syria Challenge"

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> CIC, "Private Sponsorship Program"

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

All sponsorship funds are deposited in a bank account set up by Ryerson University. Each donation over \$10 receives an instant tax receipt.<sup>59</sup> Once the raised funds are sufficient, the sponsoring team needs to determine the family size they are prepared to sponsor. The family size is dependent on the amount of funds the team has available. The team is also required to specify the type of case they want, for example a blended visa case, a referred case, or one that is pre approved. Then the team needs to prepare a full settlement plan, which is onerous and time-consuming<sup>60</sup>. The team meets the family at the airport and escorts them to their accommodations. The team is legally obliged to assist with housing; ensure the family has clothing, furniture and food; provide a general orientation of Toronto and its transportation system; and connect the family to settlement service organizations.<sup>61</sup> Assistance is also required with healthcare, ESL, child care, finding employment, schooling if needed, drivers licenses, phone plans, bank accounts - everything that is needed to start new lives.<sup>62</sup> Typically, the settlement plan indicates the role of each sponsoring team member including the specific aspects of integration for which they are responsible. Once the funds and the settlement plan are readied, the sponsoring team can be matched. *Lifeline Syria* representatives present the team with a list of families available for sponsorship and the team decides on the family they want.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE SPONSORSHIP PROCESS

Deciding which family to sponsor proved to be an emotionally and mentally difficult process for my team and I. First, the available information about the families is vague. In fact, the decision largely depends on the amount of funds the team has managed to raise. For example, when my team and I were getting matched, we received a list that simply stated:

- Case 1: Mother, father and two children. Mother speaks a bit of English. Dad is an electrician.
- Case 2: Mother, three children, one child is a quadriplegic.
- Case 3: Mother, father, two children, grandmother, aunt (mother's sister) and her newborn baby.

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<sup>59</sup> Ryerson University, "Lifeline Syria Challenge"

<sup>60</sup> A great additional settlement resource is the Orientation to Ontario<sup>60</sup> bilingual pilot project, co-funded by CIC and the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade. The pilot initiative is designed to ease the transition of newcomers by providing access to standardized information about settling in Ontario and connecting newcomers to community services shortly after arrival. It provides a handbook in ten different languages, settlement plan and checklist tools, as well as workshops for the sponsors and refugees upon arrival.

<sup>61</sup> Lifeline Syria, "Our work"; Ryerson University, "Lifeline Syria Challenge"

<sup>62</sup> For a sample copy of the Team Amalya settlement check list see Appendix

If we wanted to sponsor the second family, it would be very expensive and we would need to raise additional funds. Beyond the funds, it is not hard to imagine how difficult it is to make such a decision because all of these families are vulnerable and in need. How can one decide who is most deserving of sponsorship? In the case of our team, we decided to be matched up at random and were assigned a young couple with two small children in November 2015.

Once matched, the team revises its settlement plan to meet the needs of the specific family before the sponsorship application can be considered complete. *Lifeline Syria* assists with the application by filling out and preparing all the necessary forms on behalf of the sponsoring team. As a sponsor, one simply needs to review and sign the required documentation, making the process much easier and manageable. Once *Lifeline Syria* approves the paperwork, the application is sent to the SAH.

Recall that a SAH is an organization that is already approved by the Government for sponsoring refugees. To make the process easier and faster, *Lifeline Syria* eases the way for a number of SAHs across Toronto who review, sign and submit the sponsorship application to the CIC Processing Office in Winnipeg on behalf of the sponsor. This not only speeds up the process, but most importantly, it eliminates a lot of the red tape of having to apply directly to CIC as a sponsorship group. After the Processing Office in Winnipeg receives the application forms from both the sponsors and the refugee family, the file is assigned a G number and sent to the visa office abroad for processing. Since Syrian files are expedited, the goal has been to have the files approved and sent from Winnipeg within 30 days.<sup>63</sup> The visa office once again reviews the case, issues visas, and notifies the SAH of travel arrangements. The SAH alerts *Lifeline Syria* who then contacts the sponsoring team.<sup>64</sup> In the event that a team is matched with a referral case who has not already been approved by the visa office abroad, the five-phase process begins once the application has been sent to the visa office from the Processing Office in Winnipeg.

There are some disadvantages to being a sponsoring group through *Lifeline Syria* and, hence, through a SAH. One is that sponsors are often provided with very little information. The communication process is experienced as slow and vague. This is partly because of the process itself, but partly because *Lifeline Syria* is

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<sup>63</sup> Joe Friesen, "Refugee sponsorship"

<sup>64</sup> CIC, "Private Sponsorship Program"

staffed predominately by volunteers. In our case, the family we are sponsoring was a referred case by family members already in Canada. This slightly complicated the communication process as *Lifeline Syria* was simultaneously providing information and updates – at times contradictory - to the family members, as well as our team.

However, the biggest administrative challenge resulted from the Government's surprise announcement that it would be capping sponsoring applications for Syrian refugees. Private sponsors were given little more than 24 hours notice that applications had to be received before midnight March 31 in order to be finalized by the end of 2016 or early 2017. In addition, the Government announced that it had released all re-assigned and temporary staff processing Syrian refugees and closed processing centres in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, as well as staff in the Winnipeg processing centre. It was also announced that Syrian families are no longer prioritized and charter flights for Syrian refugees have been cancelled. This means that we are back to a system where it takes months to process and register a family through regular visa officers abroad and no financial support for travel arrangements. With these changes, it no longer matters if a team is registered as a sponsor group through Lifeline Syria or as a group of five directly with the Government.

This announcement was met with animosity and frustration from private sponsors. As a result, an emergency meeting for all private sponsors was held on March 30, 2016 at St. Stephen's-in-the-field Church in Toronto. There were 300 members of sponsorship groups in attendance and the meeting was chaired by John Sewell, former Toronto Mayor. The meeting focused on policies that sponsor groups would like to see the government urgently adopt. These included providing adequate notice of any changes in refugee policy, permission for private sponsors to take GAR families, restoring staffing capacity in processing offices abroad, removing the cap on Syrian refugees, restoring financial support for travel expenses, and allotting a family to all sponsorship groups who had applied by the end of April. In an effort to bring these urgent matters to the Government's attention, sponsors wrote letters to Minister John McCallum and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Just like many of the sponsors at that meeting, I too, have become emotionally engaged and immersed in this cause thus, the current barriers to the arrival of our assigned Syrian family were disappointing. With the desire to have the family arrive in Canada as soon as possible, we contacted Immigration, Refugees and

Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to track the file. However, we were informed that despite being the sponsoring group we could not access any information on the status of the file without written consent from the refugees being sponsored. Considering we do not have direct contact with the Syrian family – who are currently located in Istanbul – as well as language barriers would make obtaining such consent impossible. In an unfortunate turn of events, after contacting *Lifeline Syria* for assistance we were informed that the file for our assigned family had been misplaced and not assigned a G number in Winnipeg. Consequently, it has yet to be sent to the processing office in Turkey. We were forced to resubmit all of the documentation and hope the file gets assigned a number soon considering the current precarious policies.

In addition to the many administrative and policy related obstacles, my experience as part of a team privately sponsoring a family has highlighted that the main settlement challenges are related to housing, language and health care. In relation to housing, while some landlords have been very generous and compassionate, many others have been uncooperative, insisting on reference checks for the actual tenants. Many landlords are not willing to rent to the sponsor on behalf of the family before arrival. Another challenge, even when everything is approved and ready to go, is that sponsor groups are only given a few days notice before the arrival of the refugee family. As a result, housing arrangements become difficult because sponsors are either forced to make rent payments even though the family has yet to arrive, or forced to take the risk of having the family arrive prior to signing a rent agreement. In this case, the sponsoring team would have to arrange temporary housing until a permanent residence can be found. In our case, we decided to not sign a rental agreement until the family arrives in Canada. With the help of community partners and Lifeline Syria we have compiled a list of potential temporary housing that we can arrange for the family upon their arrival until permanent accommodation is found. As a team, we also felt that it is important the family have personal input in their accommodation after arriving in Toronto. However, as a community, we have to ensure that there is adequate housing and settlement services in place to receive the influx of refugees.

Another major challenge is language. While some of the Syrian refugees have fairly high levels of English proficiency, others know only the basics. They cannot be expected to learn English overnight and jump into the workforce only to get stuck in menial jobs. It would be very beneficial to have them spend at least six months in an ESL classroom before venturing into the labour market. The ESL classroom could play a significant role in the settlement process, providing not only language training, but also a sense of home and

acclimatization to the new society. Currently, there are a number of ESL courses and support options for refugees which are predominately offered through community settlement organizations. It is unclear how many refugees choose to take advantage of these ESL services, as it may interfere with the desire and even pressure to find employment.

Healthcare is also a primary concern, but many positive steps have been taken towards remediating this issue. For example, Syrian refugees have access to the Ontario Health Insurance Program (OHIP) during the three-month waiting period required for coverage.<sup>65</sup> Further, in Toronto there have been a number of health clinics established to assist with the needs of refugees, such as dental clinics, walk-in clinics, and many doctors within Women's College Hospital and a large network have made their services available at no cost.

Overall, while many people have criticized the refugee resettlement process in Canada for being too lenient and not sufficient; others such as private sponsors who are eagerly awaiting the arrival of the refugee families see it as tedious, lengthy and bureaucratic. From an advocacy point of view, many positive steps and initiatives have been undertaken from the Government, communities and organizations. However, the process remains slow, vague and frustrating for both the refugee families and sponsors. Considering the current changes in policies and the resulting implications, I have little doubt that my reflections and experiences in relation to the private sponsorship process are unique.

## DISCUSSION

For many years, Canada was the only country in the world with a private sponsorship program. When it was created in 1978 under Operation Lifeline, the Government pledged to resettle one refugee for every privately sponsored one. The incredible generosity and humanitarian tradition in the resettlement of refugees earned Canada the UN Nansen Refugee Award.<sup>66</sup> Thirty-seven years later, Canadians once again are proactively engaged in the process of refugee resettlement. The UNHCR has been a prominent advocate for resettlement

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<sup>65</sup> Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, "OHIP Coverage Waiting Period," [http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/publications/ohip/ohip\\_waiting\\_pd.aspx](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/publications/ohip/ohip_waiting_pd.aspx)

<sup>66</sup> Sean Fine, "Canada's Response to Refugee Crises Today a Stark Contrast to Past Efforts," The Globe and Mail, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadas-response-to-refugee-crises-today-a-stark-contrast-to-past-efforts/article26223762/>; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Archive of Past Nansen Winners," <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c467-page5.html>



programs as they are a tool of protection and an alternative to perilous irregular movements.<sup>67</sup> In fact, private sponsorship offers a durable solution and should be seen as part of a comprehensive response between Governments and advocates who are not confined to simply observing refugee policy. It is not only a way for states to share responsibility, but also a way for the public to participate in the implementation of international obligations<sup>68</sup>, support refugee issues, enhance citizens' awareness, and foster multi-cultural experiences.

Thus, we need to educate the broader public to bring about an attitudinal change. Refugees are not "the other" to be feared or resented, but potentially educated and hard working contributors to Canadian society. Historically, migration has been overwhelmingly positive and consistent with development. Our refugees have become successful, well-settled Canadians contributing meaningfully to the cultural, economic and educational success of this country. Interestingly, compared to GARs, privately sponsored refugees have been shown to do much better in English ability, employment and health status.<sup>69</sup> A 2007 internal evaluation by CIC<sup>70</sup> also revealed that privately sponsored refugees become self-supporting far more quickly than refugees sponsored through the Government; and that overall sponsors are successful in meeting the needed support of refugees during the sponsorship process.<sup>71</sup>

As this paper has highlighted, Canada's private refugee sponsorship program and organizations such as *Lifeline Syria* are unique and commendable. While recent practice has shown a number of issues and obstacles with current policy changes, private sponsorship can strengthen resettlement of refugees and positively contribute to both the receiving communities and the newcomers. It is important that future research explore the impacts of private refugee sponsorships, especially from the views of the refugees being sponsored.

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<sup>67</sup> Judith Kumin, "Welcoming engagement: How private sponsorship can strengthen refugee resettlement in the European Union". Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Canada4Refugees, "Objectives" <https://canada4refugees.org/objectives/>

<sup>70</sup> CIC, "Summative Evaluation of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program" <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/psrp/psrp-summary.asp#summary>

<sup>71</sup> Judith Kumin, "Welcoming engagement"

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## APPENDIX

### SETTLEMENT PLAN CHECKLISTS

#### FIRST DAYS

- Go to your local settlement agency and talk to a settlement counsellor.
- Apply for a Social Insurance Number (SIN).
- Apply for an Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) card.
- Open a bank account.
- Find information about working in Ontario.
- Contact an employment centre to help you find a job.
- Locate your nearest library (for resources and free access to the internet).
- Get information about your rights as an employee or tenant.
- Apply for the Canada Child Tax Benefit.
- Enrol your children in school.
- Get a map of your community and learn about public transportation.
- Find language classes for you and your family.
- Learn about where to buy the things you need.
- Apply for a driver's licence.

#### HEALTH CARE, HOUSING, CONSUMER AWARENESS AND TRANSPORTATION

- Submit an application for an OHIP card.
- Purchase health insurance for your first three months in Canada.



- Find a family doctor.
- Locate the nearest hospital and walk-in clinic.
- Find housing that fits your budget.
- Understand your rights as a tenant or homeowner.
- Plan for all housing-related costs, including insurance, utilities, and property taxes.
- Explore grocery stores and markets in your community and know how much food will cost.
- Arrange for a phone number where you can be reached.
- Know where to access the internet if necessary.
- Become aware of the public transit options available in your community.
- Apply for an Ontario driver's licence.

#### CHILD CARE AND ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

- Make arrangements for child care.
- Know which school(s) your children will be attending.
- Know the deadline for registering your children in school.
- Obtain all the documents you need to register your children in school: proof of age.
- Obtain all the documents you need to register your children in school: proof of address.
- Obtain all the documents you need to register your children in school: proof of guardianship.
- Obtain all the documents you need to register your children in school: immunization records.
- Arrange appropriate transportation for your children to and from school.

## CHILD CARE, POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

- Make arrangements for child care.
- Know the college or university application deadlines for you or your children.
- Know the general admission requirements.
- Apply for any available funding support.
- Learn the college, university, or school board courses relevant to your occupation that you can take on a part-time basis.

## LANGUAGE TRAINING AND BRIDGING PROGRAM

- Have your language skills assessed.
- Identify the language program that best suits your needs.
- Speak to a counsellor to learn about language training specific to your occupation.
- Locate bridging programs in your region that are relevant to your career goals.

## WORK-RELATED DOCUMENTS

- Apply for your Social Insurance Number (SIN).
- Know whether your occupation is regulated in Ontario.
- Have your professional credentials evaluated.

## LOOKING FOR WORK

- Speak to a settlement counsellor or an employment counsellor about your job search needs and next steps.
- Gain a basic understanding of Ontario workplace culture in your preferred occupation.
- Prepare a résumé and cover letter that suit your occupation in Canada.

- Begin to network effectively and accumulate a list of local contacts.
- Contact a Small Business Enterprise Centre to get information about opening your own business.
- Locate any internship programs available in your area of expertise that can provide you with Canadian work experience.

#### ESTIMATED MONTHLY BUDGET

- Rent: \$1500 (utilities included)
- Food: \$800
- Phones and Internet: \$300
- Transportation: \$300
- Miscellaneous: \$200
- Unforeseen Costs: \$200