

Syrian Refugees and their Education in Canada

IAN WINCHESTER
University Of Calgary

It is a good and generous thing that Canada, under the present Liberal government, is doing with respect to Syrian refugees, namely, taking in of twenty five thousand or more within a calendar year's span. The previous government had planned to take in ten thousand or so Syrians of all ages who were specially in danger in contemporary Syria as they happened to be among the few Christians left. Christians during the five years of civil war had been targeted and were being slaughtered daily by many of the regime -fighters, both moderate and extreme or failing that by government forces. All of these who were on the Conservative government's lists had Canadian sponsors. And these sponsors were usually connected with willing churches and businesses as well as families already in Canada from Syria. So while it was a small program it was a plausible one with many possible supports.

The new program is much larger, much more rushed and with very little in the way of careful vetting of the incoming refugees. Nearly all of these new refugees are Moslems. Could there be extremists among them wishing to do harm in Canada after they arrive? Quite possibly. But it is a chance that the present government is apparently willing to take. In my view it is a chance that should be taken by a country like Canada that espouses values that embrace all humanity regardless of their origins, their creed, their age or their social or political beliefs. The needs of the many certainly outweigh the dangers posed by a few.

But while there has been little time for vetting those invited to come, there has also been little planning for the education, or re-education, of those who have been invited here. Some of those who come will have children of a variety of ages. Some will have suffered disasters to family member, quite possibly deaths. When this happens to one or other of the parents this is an especially difficult situation as future income to support a family will be

likely dependent on one already over-stressed and stretched parent. The simultaneous first task is not only one of settling each family into some sort of family accommodation and offering financial and social supports, but also in offering the kinds of education that will be immediately needed. The young children, from kindergarten on up to the end of high school will be in need of transition to English (or perhaps French) opportunities in local schools. Although most will be accommodated in the local "public" schools, many Muslims already in Canada would prefer their children to be in Catholic schools where they apparently suppose that the moral standards are stricter among the students. There does not appear to be any particular evidence for that notion, but certainly the rhetoric of the public schools is towards the progressive end in most Canadian provinces whereas the local bishop nominally in charge of the Catholic system in local jurisdictions usually makes clear that there is no particular support for, and no discussion in school of, things like gay marriage or gay-straight alliances or support for the transgendered in the Catholic schools under his jurisdiction. Whether such differences will matter to someone who has just escaped death at the hands of wayward armies and heavily armed groups destroying their town and cities or who has arrived at some strange country by a rickety boat or an air-filled dinghy, is unclear. But one hopes that both public and Catholic schools will do their part to accommodate our newcomers from Syria.

The practical difficulty that is faced by families who have a professional member, whether man or woman, is that professional qualifications are not usually accepted without further education or re-education in the Canadian context. This means that a physician, a lawyer, a pharmacist, an engineer or many people with tradesmen qualifications are required not only to get English up to passable standards but also to re-train in their chosen profession or occupation. This is never easy as often it means somehow getting an apprentice-like place in a very restricted profession, the cost of which may be prohibitive. To add to this, the Canadian context is such that immigration is a matter for the federal government whereas occupational standards and legislation are characteristically provincial matters and can vary from province to province. And there is no coordination between levels of government regarding immigration except in Quebec. Thus a

newcomer faces not only the challenge of quickly becoming competent in the new language applied to their former profession or occupation, but also in somehow satisfying professionally licensed groups like the provincial medical associations or legal associations or engineering associations or teaching associations that their qualifications count. Furthermore, even if one qualifies in one province it does not necessarily mean that that qualification is portable. Teachers, for example, trained in Alberta are not necessarily acceptable next door in British Columbia without further ado.

An ordinary immigrant coming to Canada usually arrives via chain migration to live initially with relatives who are already here or at least is in contact with them. From relatives or friends such restrictions relating to profession or occupation are often known. But for Syrian refugees cast out of their homeland in a rush by war, and with no contacts in Canada, the likelihood that they will have any idea of what they are about to face occupationally is likely to come as considerable shock.

For these reasons our federal government has a responsibility to work with its provincial counterparts and with our many welcoming organizations to see that our newcomers from Syria are given extended opportunities, practical help, continued funding and put under no federal rush to qualify to speak the languages of Canada. They will need direct help to qualify or re-qualify for an profession or occupation. They should be given a sense of the nature of the political and legislative landscape of the country, and be offered daycare, kindergarten, and education specially aimed at helping their children quickly become Canadian citizens with a knowledge of their new home and a sense of the general values of the kind espoused in our constitution. But this is an educational job that required close relationships between levels of government and a generous financial effort from all parties: federal, provincial and private. Let us hope that our various governments, led by our federal one, take the initiative to see that these potentially valuable future Canadian citizens get all the educational help they need.

Ian Winchester
Editor

