



# Syrian Cultural Practices

## A Guide for Refugee Sponsors

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## Important note to using this guide:

- Please note that the information in this guide presents behavioural predictors based on cultural generalizations gleaned from studies by cultural experts.
- These predictors may be used to help shape our initial interactions with Syrian people, but as we get to know people individually, we will want to adjust our interactions accordingly.
- The behavioural preferences of Syrian people may also be impacted by factors like socioeconomic background/class, level of education, and region of origin within Syria.

## Culture Overview

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|-------------------|---|
| <b>Background</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Syria is 90% Arab<sup>3</sup></li><li>• There are also small Kurdish and Armenian populations in Syria<sup>2</sup></li></ul>  |
| <b>Language</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Syria's official language is Arabic<sup>3</sup></li><li>• Many Syrians from the city speak a language in addition to Arabic<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ French is the most common, and many educated Syrians are fluent in French or English as well as Arabic<sup>4</sup></li></ul></li></ul>   |
| <b>Religion</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Nearly three quarters of Syria's population is Muslim</li><li>• The remaining quarter is predominantly Christian<sup>2</sup></li></ul>  |
| <b>Clothing</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Syrians, regardless of background, tend to dress modestly in public</li><li>• A devout Muslim woman will cover her legs, arms, and torso up to her collarbone and may wear a headscarf</li><li>• Most Muslim women over 65 also wear a headscarf as a sign of age, if not belief</li><li>• Syrians may be taken aback by the casual—and by Syrian standards, revealing –clothing styles of Canadian women, particularly in the summer<sup>5</sup></li></ul> |

# Family Life

- General Overview**
- Syrians prioritize family above all else
  - The family background of an individual is the basis of their reputation and social status<sup>6</sup>
    - Family reputation is as important as individual freedom<sup>5</sup>
  - A great amount of honour and respect is placed on the family<sup>6</sup>
  - Families are generally large and extended in Syria
    - They include not only parents and children, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins
  - Among family members there are close bonds of love and support, as well as responsibility and supervision
  - Syrian society is patriarchal, and everyone is under the protection and authority of the eldest male relative<sup>5</sup>
  - Syrians depend on their families to such an extent that disrupting family life is very upsetting<sup>6</sup>

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- Decision Making**
- The eldest male relative (most often the husband/father of a household) is the primary decision-maker – the last word goes to him
  - Although the eldest male relative is the family decision-maker, women and younger men engage in a great deal of negotiation and non-confrontational actions to achieve their own goals<sup>5</sup>

## Considerations for Canadians Sponsoring Syrian Families

- Likely the husband/father will speak on behalf of all family members, including their own siblings, for example, their unmarried sisters
- The wife/mother may or may not be in the room during decision-making
- As their sponsoring team, we want to be less direct when offering recommendations
- Best approach is to suggest that X decision needs to be made, here are various options, we might recommend option A and B, and then leave it to the husband/father to decide
  - We can say: "This is your decision. Please let us know what you'd like to do because this is your family."
- Decisions may be made on the spot or the husband/father may want to think about it/talk to his family members
  - We can say: "Would you like some time to think about it?" or "Would you like you talk to your family and then let us know?"
  - Don't recommend: "Would you like to consult with your wife?"

## Parenting

- Children are highly valued as a blessing from God
  - The more children one has, the more fortunate one is considered, as children provide extra hands to work in the fields and ensure that their parents will be taken care of in old age<sup>3</sup>
- Syrians are very affectionate with children—even the children of strangers—and will hold them on their laps, tousele their heads, and kiss the cheeks of babies and children<sup>5</sup>
- Primary and secondary education is mandatory
  - Middle school, which begins at age 13, marks the end of mixed-sex education
  - The literacy rate is 86% overall<sup>7</sup>
- Syrians parent their children closely
  - This includes helping children with schoolwork and monitoring all activities as best they can
- Traditionally, girls who have passed puberty are less likely to play outside and more likely to stay home or help with chores. If they do go out, they do so with other girls or older siblings
- Boys often monitor the behavior of their sisters, and older girls (and sometimes boys) help take care of younger siblings
- It is also customary in Syria to discipline children physically

### Considerations for Canadians Sponsoring Syrian Families

Syrian families may have different approaches to parenting which may not be in alignment with preferred Canadian parenting approaches.

## Marriage

- Marriage and the birth of children are among the greatest celebrations in Syria<sup>6</sup>
- While some young men and women choose their partners, most Syrian marriages are arranged by their families and are preceded by a formal engagement<sup>5</sup>
- While more leniency is now allowed, particularly in cities and among the upper classes, it is still extremely rare for a couple to marry against their family's wishes
- Although the state and the Muslim religion both oppose the current dowry system, it is deeply entrenched in the family structure<sup>3</sup>
- Syrians tend to marry at a young age
  - Rural and working-class women generally marrying younger than women who are urban and/or more educated
  - By law, boys are eligible to marry at 18 and girls are eligible at 17
  - It is not uncommon for men to be 10 to 15 years older than their wives
- In wealthier, more educated families, young women marry shortly after completing university
  - Men generally marry after they complete their education and have found regular employment
- Children live with their parents until they are married, and children who do not marry remain in their parents' home
- Before getting married, a young man is expected to be able to support himself and his wife<sup>5</sup>

# Gender Roles

## Women

- Gender roles in Syria vary according to economic class, family, and urban/rural residency<sup>5</sup>
- While women are legally allowed to work outside the home in Syria, there are significant obstacles
  - In middle-class urban and rural households, fewer women work outside the home, particularly if there are young children, as mothers want and are expected to stay home and care for their children<sup>5</sup>
  - Among the upper and more educated classes, women work outside the home, and can be found in a wide range of professions
- Traditionally, women are responsible for running the household<sup>3</sup>
  - In general, women cook, clean, and care for children<sup>5</sup>
  - Daughters are often expected to help with the housework
- Women tend to take care of guests

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## Men

- Men are mainly responsible for working and financially supporting the entire family
- Boys may contribute to the family's income by working odd delivery or agricultural jobs
  - However, most children do not work until they finish or quit school<sup>5</sup>
- Men/sons tend not to take care of the home – or do not discuss publically that they do
  - Yard work/snow shoveling would be appropriate

# Communication

## Greetings

- It is appropriate to greet Syrian men in the following way
    - For Canadian men – shake hands
    - For Canadian women – say hello without touching, unless the Syrian man offers to shake your hand
  - It is appropriate to greet Syrian women in the following way
    - Syrian women may put their hand on their chest which signals a greeting (don't shake their hands)
    - For Canadian men – say hello without touching, unless the Syrian woman offers to shake your hand (avoid touching Syrian women unless a woman signals that it is appropriate)
    - For Canadian women – shake the Syrian woman's hand, and/or kiss both sides of her cheeks
  - Children are expected to shake hands when they meet new people<sup>5</sup>
    - Syrian boys over 15 – treat with the same social rules as Syrian men
    - Syrian girls over 13 – treat with same social rules as Syrian women
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## Conversation and Behaviour

- Eye contact is acceptable with Syrian men – with Syrian women, a glance may be preferred at the beginning of an interaction
- Men tend to be quite emotionally expressive while women tend to be quieter
  - In social interactions, people stand close together, speak loudly, and gesture widely with their hands and heads
- Syrians are very affectionate people – men walk linking arms or holding hands and hug and kiss a great deal with each other, as do women with each other
  - Close physical contact in public is more common between people of the same gender than it is between girlfriend and boyfriend or husband and wife<sup>3</sup>
  - This behavior should not be understood to indicate sexual orientation
- Talking is a favorite pastime, and the art of conversation is a prized skill
- When Syrian people raise their voices, it does not indicate anger – it is very common to speak louder during a conversation and this change in tone of voice should not be misinterpreted<sup>1</sup>
- If you are sitting in front of a Syrian person, do not cross your legs with the sole of your foot facing them (it is insulting)
  - Don't put your feet on the coffee table

## Considerations for Canadians Sponsoring Syrian Families

- Comfortable areas of conversation
  - Family, background, children
  - Syrians may ask you personal questions – whether you are married, have children, brothers and sisters, if your parents are still alive, etc. – this is part of creating a personal relationship<sup>1</sup>
- Conversation areas to be delicate with
  - Stories about the war
- Conversation areas to avoid
  - Religion – until we know more about the family
  - Other sensitive conversation topics, such as politics, finances and business unless initiated by the family<sup>2</sup>
  - Social or professional success – in Syria, these are intimately linked with the political regime in power and personal or family connections with that regime<sup>1</sup>

# Social Interactions: Considerations for Canadians Sponsoring Syrian Families

- Visiting the home**
- Always knock at the door, take a few steps back, and wait until it is answered and you are invited in
  - When the husband/father is not home, male guests may not be invited in – wait at the door until you are invited in
  - When you're visiting the home, sit in the living room unless you are invited to walk through the home
  - Men tend to sit in the living room, women may sit in another room
    - Women may bring the food and drink – may/may not join you in the living room
  - What to wear when you are visiting
    - Women should avoid wearing short skirts or shorts, low necklines or tight shirts
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- Gifts**
- On your first visit, it is appropriate to bring a small gift
    - Sweets or something for the home is typical – such as chocolates, cookies, etc.
  - It is acceptable to bring small toys or treats for children
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- Food and drink**
- Food is very important in Syrian culture, so when offered food
    - Say yes – enjoy the food and drink!
    - Signal that you're enjoying the food
  - Bringing food to the family
    - Be mindful of food restrictions/observances, including Halal, for Muslim Syrians

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Contact us at: [info@bhasinconsulting.com](mailto:info@bhasinconsulting.com)