

COMING HOME *to* EDMONTON



A collection of stories
from Syrian refugees
living in Alberta

*Presented by the
United Cultures
of Canada Association*

This project was developed with financial assistance from the
Edmonton Heritage Council through the Heritage Community
Investment Program's Project Accelerator Grant.

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ISBN: 979-8-88757-836-1

Book design by Kelsey McMillan

Disclaimer

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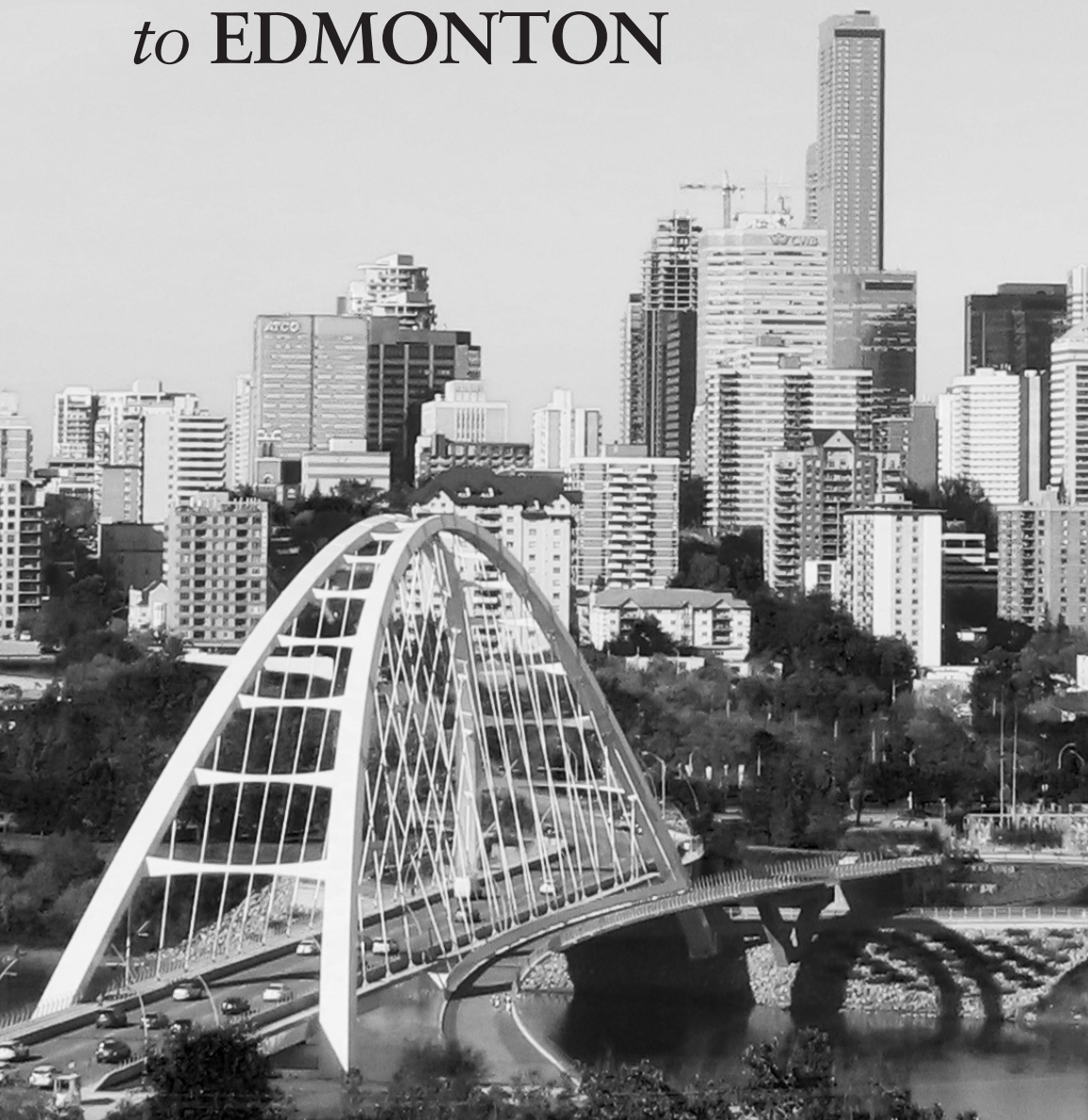




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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the gracious support of the Edmonton Heritage Council through the Heritage Community Investment Program's Project Accelerator Grant.

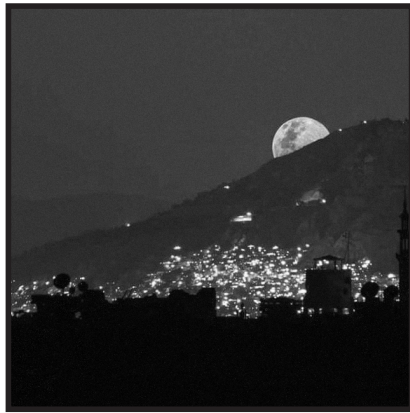
Coming Home to Edmonton collects 13 stories told by first-generation Syrian refugees living in Alberta. The stories demonstrate their deep commitment to Canada and desire to have their histories heard by fellow Canadians. UCCA's team has made their best efforts to present their lives as accurately as possible. We are deeply indebted to all 13 contributors for sharing with us their difficult journeys from chaos and displacement to safety, joy, and hope in a better future.

We extend our sincere appreciation to Hasan Al Ebrahim, who helped us arrange interviews, provided translation assistance, and offered emotional support to the narrators while recounting indescribable pain and suffering. We hope this collection becomes a piece of

Edmonton's heritage for all times to come, especially for the benefit of Syrian children and the children of other refugee families, who have faced great hardships to arrive in a place where diversity is not only tolerated but celebrated.

These stories, although deeply tragic, must be remembered because they communicate hope. We wish for you, dear reader, to find in this book a triumphant message of hope. Anything less falls short of the spirit with which the narrators shared their lives with us.

Oh My Home, Oh My Home



A popular Arabic song
(trans. Hasan Al Ebrahim)

Glory and beauty, grace and majesty
Are in your hills, in your hills
Life and relief, felicity and belief
Are in your love, in your love

Oh my home, oh my home
Shall I see, see you safe
Blessed, victorious, and honoured
Shall I see, see you eminent
Reaching the stars, reaching the stars
Oh my home, oh my home

The youth won't give up 'til you are free
Or they die, or they die
We don't fear death, we won't be
To foes like slaves, like slaves
We don't want, we don't want
Everlasting humiliation or a miserable life

We don't want but to regain
Our great glory, our great glory
Oh my home, oh my home



Introduction

In 2011, civilian protests against the Syrian government turned into widespread violence. In 2012, the Red Cross said that the situation in Syria should be considered a civil war. Since then, around half a million Syrians have lost their lives and nearly seven million have been displaced from their homes. Many left Syria, and many remained. Everyone has been affected. The numbers, however staggering, do not account for the psychological and economic difficulties faced by nearly every individual this war has touched.

Diverse and complex groups of people live in Syria, and they represent various religious, ethnic, and political identities. The story of the Syrian civil war is a story about tensions along these lines. It is also a story about social inequality, a revolutionary movement, government oppression, complex configurations of armies, and many geopolitical actors. It is a story found often under news headlines about large-scale violence against innocent people. It is a story that has spiraled into a second and equally complex story about a refugee crisis, which involves poverty, tragic events at sea, and overcrowded refugee camps. The story of the Syrian civil war is

ongoing because, as of 2022, the war has not officially ended.

This book is not about the war. It is about thirteen individuals whose journey begins in Syria and ends in Edmonton. It is about our neighbours and peers, the approximately 73,000 Syrian refugees who have settled in Canada since the start of the conflict, especially after the government launched the Operation Syrian Refugees program in 2015. Today nearly 3,000 Syrian refugees live in Edmonton, on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River.

The United Cultures of Canada Association was put in touch with these individuals with the help of Hasan Al Ebrahim, a beloved Syrian community leader with many friends throughout Alberta. Hasan is originally from Damascus. He also acted as a translator during these conversations.

Hasan explains:

“These stories speak to the challenges back home. The glorious country where we might have lived for ten generations was burned to ashes. Refugees need to share these stories so they are not forgotten. They want to share how blessed they feel to be in a safe place that is full of hope.”

Hasan Al Ebrahim



*“Refugees have the right to
dream their dreams.”*

Hasan escaped in 1989. It was during a different period of unrest, two decades before the revolutions that sparked the Syrian civil war. Hasan joined tens of thousands of other Syrian families who escaped to Jordan at that time. They settled all over the country. Many other families escaped to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Europe, and elsewhere.

“In Syria, there is a different kind of history. There have been many wars in Syria.”

By and large, Hasan says, living in Jordan was a positive experience for him. The Jordan government, along with non-profit organizations and NGOs, helped refugee families connect to basic services and health care. There were few restrictions on where Syrian refugee could live or what they could do as long as they had proper documentation. Hasan says he personally experienced very little discrimination while living in Jordan. However, Hasan and his family were not eligible to become Jordan citizens.

While living in Amman, the capital city, Hasan earned a master’s degree in economics and environmental

studies. His thesis was about using modeling to plan eco-friendly cities. The knowledge he earned in university has helped him later in life, he says, because he does a lot of complex and theoretical thinking about social issues. His siblings also earned their degrees in Amman.

When Hasan arrived in Jordan, he was legally considered an immigrant and not a refugee. International law shifted in 2011, in response to the war, and after that Hasan and his family were considered refugees. The UN defines a refugee as someone with a well-founded reason to think they will experience persecution if they return to their home country. People living in their home country who are being persecuted and cannot depend on their government for protection are also considered refugees.

Shortly after the war started, the UN began accepting applications from Syrian refugees who wished to immigrate from Jordan to another country. Different countries accept refugees through the UN at different times, depending on their own domestic policy. Hasan and his family didn't apply to the UN immediately.

But as the war progressed, and more refugees were

displaced to Jordan, it put pressure on the system. The pressure reached the point that Hasan couldn't access basic health services.

As the system was strained, tensions also rose between refugees and locals.

“I was considered someone who came from a foreign country. A foreigner. So they started to charge me a lot of money for services and everything.”

In 2015, he began preparing to apply to the UN. If accepted, the UN would connect his family with an immigration agency abroad that would sponsor him. To complete the application process, Hasan and his family did a series of interviews with UN and Canadian officials, a series of medical tests such as bloodwork, and a large amount of paperwork. This is the process for most refugees applying to the UN. Hasan was approved a year after applying.

Hasan's whole family applied, but only Hasan and his wife were selected. The family was heartbroken. His parents and siblings—three brothers and three sisters—

and all of their families are still living in Jordan. But his family supported his decision to move, knowing it would bring him safety and stability.

“I had a mix of feelings. But I had to take my small family and start a new future, to give them a chance.”

Since he left Jordan, Hasan told us, his family’s situation has remained more or less the same. However, he is sorry to have missed two of his brothers’ weddings and the birth of their children. He says his family in Jordan is supporting themselves fairly well, but he sometimes helps them financially.

Hasan, his wife, and his daughter landed in Edmonton in February of 2016. Immigration service workers processed their documents at the Toronto airport. The family also got jackets, gloves, hats, and boots in their sizes. A service worker took them to a hotel on the north side where they stayed for ten days. After that they stayed in a downtown hotel for a month. At last, Catholic Social Services set them up with townhouse close to West Edmonton Mall.

“What I love about Canada is how they deal with people. The system.”

The family was helped by social workers for about a year following their arrival. During that time, they were on a federal program to receive a monthly salary and benefits for their daughter. When the year ended, they moved into subsidized housing. Hasan started to study English full time at a Concordia University program specifically for Syrian refugees, and then took another federal EAL program.

After the English courses, Hasan started working at Canadian Tire’s financial department. It wasn’t directly related to his field of study, but Hasan learns and applies ideas quickly, which he said he gets from university. For the past four years, he has been involved with UCCA, teaching computer skills to newcomers and helping with other programs to support refugees. He is currently coordinating UCCA’s new refugee sponsorship program. Since 2020, Hasan has also been a social worker at a local Arabic school that teaches many refugee children.

Hasan is very community-minded. He is also open-

hearted and outgoing and has befriended countless newcomers and refugees since coming to Edmonton.

“I have some ability to manage, like, paperwork and insurance. So I started helping other Syrian refugees with these tasks. It has given me a good reputation in the community. I am seen now as a leader and a good, trusted person. I want to help them see what I’ve seen since I came to Canada.”

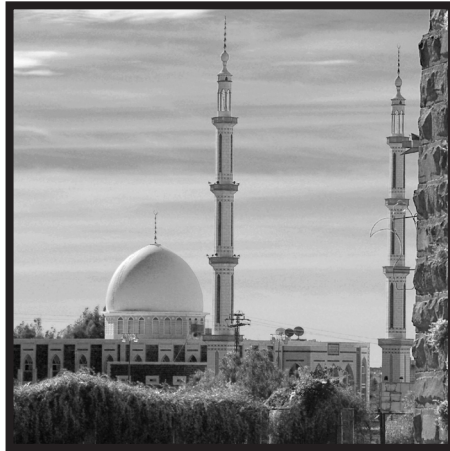
Hasan’s kindness has given him a reputation for being diplomatic and fair. He has considered one day running for public office.

“I want to do things to help refugees. To make their lives better. To include them in a different vision. They have the right to dream their dreams and live in Canada without any fear. They have a right to not worry about harm to their children coming from outside. My dream is to work with

*refugee families from all over the world,
and all cultures, to find a good future.”*

Hasan’s commitment has made this book possible. While the following discussions were taking place, Hasan was speaking to us through Zoom from Jordan, where he was visiting his family for the first time.

Anas Ismail



*“Stand up again, shake off the dust, and
keep going.”*

Anas tells us he was living in the city of Homs, which was the third-largest city in Syria. Homs is in the west of Syria, not far from the border to Lebanon. He lived in a big house with his wife and children. They shared the house with Anas's parents and his siblings and their kids. The family worked in the construction and home renovation industry, which Anas tells us was good before the war. For the most part, he says, life was comfortable and uncomplicated.

“Before the war, my only goal was to grow my business and find a good school for my children. After the war, my only goal was to save their lives.”

After the city of Dara in the north, Homs was the second place to experience full-scale warfare and disorder in the early days of the war. The city was under siege from 2011 to 2014. From the start, schools and hospitals were closed and other services were disrupted. Grocery stores experienced severe shortages. To find enough food for his family, Anas says, he would drive around Homs for a whole day going from store to store. He knew how dangerous it was to be driving around.

*“Simply going out the front door
was a risk.”*

There was fighting in the streets of Homs. Anas tells us he witnessed his close friends and peers murdered before his eyes. He remembers snipers around the city, who would hide in tall buildings and, it seemed, kill people at random. Residents of Homs became too afraid to leave their houses. People who were not killed could be harassed or detained. Anas says his family was especially afraid of the bombs. They would detonate or fall from the sky at any place and time, he explains.

Anas and his family would watch the war progress on television in the evenings until the media was censored. Communication companies like network providers were also tampered with. Lines of connection between friends and family members broke down. It was too dangerous to visit in person, and people were afraid that their phone calls would be tapped. By saying a few strong words, you could be killed or arrested, Anas explains. Police and soldiers roaming the streets were aggressive and unpredictable. Without cause, people could be arrested, robbed, or killed.

Anas would not let his children leave his sight. He was terrified for their safety. There was, in addition to open warfare, wide reports of kidnappings throughout Syria at that time. Children were held for ransom, trafficked, or met with any number of horrible fates.

For four years, Anas and his family lived under these conditions.

“All the cameras around the world cannot explain what happened in Syria. All the news channels cannot explain what happened in Syria. No movie or documentary can explain what happened in Syria. We were not dealt with as people. We were dealt with as animals.”

By 2015, it became clear to Anas that his family had no future in Homs. If they stayed, they would likely live in poverty and fear for a long time. He made the decision to move to Lebanon with his wife and kids, leaving behind his extended family. People took many routes to flee Homs. Some traveled by bus, other hired cars, and some took their own vehicles. Anas and his family took their own car. He couldn't acquire the proper legal

documents that officials were demanding to exit Syria, so he was forced to bribe police and army officials along the way.

While driving to Lebanon, Anas says, the whole family started to cry. First the children cried, and then Anas's wife, and then Anas. The emotion was unexplainable. They had no idea what was waiting for them once they reached Lebanon.

“We didn’t know where we were going. We didn’t have a vision. We were just trying to survive, to find a good place for the children. The journey out of Syria was very hard. You cannot imagine what happened during that time.”

The car was once stopped by an armed stranger. He forced open the back door and pulled out Anas's young son. The boy was one year old at the time. Later the same day, Anas received a phone call telling him his son was being held for ransom. He was forced to pay the kidnapper an extremely large sum, which was equal to about \$2,000 Canadian dollars, Anas explains. Once the kidnapper received the money, he gave Anas directions to a nearby garage. There Anas found his

baby alone and unharmed.

When the family arrived in Lebanon, they first settled in Byblos, a city on the Mediterranean coast. He tried to build a life there, but he encountered tricksters and corruptions. There were people, he says, who would try to charge him exorbitant rates because he was Syrian. Anas decided to move the family once again. This time they went by boat to Izmir, Turkey. Their life there was better. They didn't speak Turkish, but they met and other Arabic-speaking refugee families. However, Anas says his family also faced discrimination in Turkey, which he believes is a result of widespread misinformation and misunderstandings about Syrians. Bias against Syrians also made it hard to find work, Anas says.

The family lived in Izmir for a year before Anas decided to apply to the UN. Six months later, he received a letter inviting him to Canada.

They arrived in Edmonton in 2017. For the first few days, the family lived in a refugee reception house set up by Catholic Social Services. Anas says he was feeling overwhelmed during these days. But he was delighted when a group of Syrians from Edmonton, including

Hasan, came to visit him. They sat down with Anas over food and drink. They comforted him and helped him orient to his new environment. Anas decided to move into an apartment close to other members of the Syrian community. He says he would spend all his spare time with them. In Edmonton, Anas even met several people from his home city of Homs.

“Life in Canada allows us to do anything. Sometimes, in Syria, we wouldn’t even be allowed to go the mosque and pray. But in Canada, I can do what I want. I can pray. I can wear any kind of clothes. I can even drink a beer. In Syria, that was very hard even before the war. Canada gave us not just a new life, but a chance to meet our friends, to meet our loved ones.”

Anas has been working hard to establish himself. When he arrived, mastering the English language was his key priority. Anas is passionate about learning. When Hasan visited Anas, he would find notes all around his apartment showing the English names of all the common objects and furniture. Anas has since taken

English courses at NorQuest College. He has found work as a security guard and a bus driver.

In his spare time, Anas is committed to helping others. He enjoys supporting other people with his hospitality.

“One thing I like to do is give food to people. I offer food to everyone. When I meet someone outside or living on the street who is in need, I always invite them to my house for food. For this, I receive blessings from God.”

We asked Anas if he has a message for current and future refugees to Canada.

“Try to stand up again, shake off the dust, and keep going. You will achieve your goals someday. If you are a positive person and help your community, you will find a lot of success.”

Dena Aroub



*“If you have a safe country,
don’t start a war.”*

“Before the war, it was a wonderful country. It is the best country I have seen. Everything was available to us. My family had their own house and car. We studied in a local school, and it was perfect. It was the best country in the world for school. That’s all I remember.”

Growing up, Dena’s environment was nothing but loving. She does not recall seeing hatred or violence in her childhood. She lived in a single building in Homs with her father and her father’s extended family. Her neighbourhood, she tells us, was peaceful. Families of various religious and ethnicities lived together, and everyone got along. Dena’s culture celebrates peace between people, she explains.

Dena was eight when the war started. At that age, she did not understand the scope of what was happening in Syria. She remembers hearing about revolutionaries. She heard stories about people shooting each other on the streets. She heard that women and children were being killed, too. These stories were in the news and on the radio. They were things that the adults were talking about.

In 2011, Dena's older brother decided to escape to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He knew that Dubai was a relatively rich and stable place. Syrians who lived in the UAE were often successful and could support their families financially. He encouraged his parents and siblings to join him in Dubai, but Dena's mother decided to stay. Dena's family, like many people at that time, were devoted to Syria and believed that the fighting would be short lived. They had seen what happened in other Middle East countries. Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya had also had revolutions beginning 2010, and by now they were relatively safe.

Dena's brother passed away a few months after living in Dubai. The family was devastated.

A year went by, and the situation in Homs grew worse until they were forced to leave. They decided to go to Lebanon because it was nearby and because the culture and lifestyle are similar to Syria. The family also had relatives in Tripoli, a large city on the coast of Lebanon. But first they left Homs and spent eight months in Damascus, which was dangerous but still much safer than Homs. In Damascus, they spent all their time preparing for the journey. Dena remembers saying goodbye to her relatives.

“I remember my aunt tried to persuade us to stay and not leave them. She said the situation would be over within a few months. But my mom said, ‘No, I can’t live here without my son.’ So we stayed only two days longer, and then my mom said, ‘Yes, we must go now,’ because the situation was getting worse and not better. That was in 2013.”

Dena’s life changed from the moment she left Syria. She tells us she doesn’t like to think about those times, or about her early memories.

“Yes, I remember what it was like before the war. We were one family, and our brother was with us. But beyond that, personally, I don’t like to remember because it hurts too much.”

Dena and her family escaped by bus. They boarded a vehicle packed full of families on its way to the Syria-Lebanon border. The drive is usually around three hours, but on the day they escaped it took twelve hours. Towns and villages along the road were sites

of active warfare. Soldiers and armed militias were blocking traffic to search vehicles.

“They stopped our bus. They asked for our IDs or if anyone had any weapons. They asked us what was happening, why we were leaving. They said, ‘You made a mess in this country and now you are leaving!’ It was abusive language.”

The family was exhausted when they eventually made it to Tripoli and met up with their relatives.

Dena tells us her family wanted to stay in Lebanon. Life felt familiar there, and they were not very far from home. However, Lebanon is expensive compared to Syria, and Dena’s father struggled to find adequate work. After a few months, they decided to continue to Egypt. One of Dena’s sisters was already living there, and she offered to help them find a house.

“I remember it was March 12. That was our flight to Egypt. On March 12, 2013.”

Dena remembers the conflicting emotions of that day. She and her sisters were excited. By that time, they had come to think of Syria as a dangerous place, a place that had hurt them. In Syria, they had lost everything, including their brother. But Dena could tell that her parents were sad. They were leaving the place they knew for most of their lives. Things got better when they reunited with Dena's sister at the Cairo airport, however. Dena and her older sister used to live together and talk every day, but they had not seen each other for over eight months.

The family settled in 6th of October, a city near Giza, which is about one hour by car from Cairo. As the war in Syria dragged on, many refugees settled in 6th of October. They started businesses, opened restaurants, and built schools for Syrian children. Eventually people started calling 6th of October "little Damascus," and Dena says it was rare to run into an Egyptian person. However, there were very few Syrians in 6th of October when Dena and her family arrived in 2013. It is also an expensive city with many tourists. The family felt afraid and out of place.

Once they found their footing, Dena says, the family

felt comfortable in Egypt. Her father opened a small restaurant. They found Egyptians to be very supportive of Syrians. Dena eventually enrolled in one of several private Syrian schools. These schools were more expensive, but they felt safer. Egyptian public schools were free, but many parents worried about their quality. When Dena attended public school, she found the classrooms overcrowded and unsafe. Sometimes the teacher would not come to class or would leave the student unsupervised. Many students turned to drugs and alcohol.

Around 2019, the family began to struggle again. Dena's father closed his restaurant. He tried to start a second business but it failed. Support from the locals had started to dwindle, and he had no relatives or business partners who could support him. Dena was in university at that time and she had to drop out. She had been studying engineering and later business because the program was cheaper.

Dena's father returned to Damascus to start a business there because he had heard the situation was better. He went alone. Meanwhile, Dena began working as a salesperson at a bag store in a mall. She became known for her excellent work ethic and intelligence and was

even promoted to manager. Still, it was difficult to think about studying or planning for the future. In Egypt, Dena explains, you need to work twelve hours a day at most jobs to survive.

Around this time, Dena's mother applied to the UN to come to Canada. Dena's parents were accepted, but her mother insisted that she would not go without her daughters. So Dena and two of her sisters, who were not married at the time, flew to Toronto and then to Edmonton. Another sister was already living in Edmonton. She had arrived two years earlier with her two kids. Once again, the family had an airport reunion.

"It was a very amazing feeling to see her and her children. Because it's your family. It's part of your heart. We hugged, and she started to cry. It was a really amazing feeling. This was in April 2019."

The family came to live on the west side of Edmonton, near Dena's sister. As we speak to her, Dena is nineteen years old. She is studying business in university. Her vision is to open a gift store that sells speciality import items from Egypt.

We asked Dena if she has a final message for the readers of this book.

“If you have a safe country, don’t start a war.”

Safwan



“Life in Canada is easy.”

Safwan spent most of his early life in Homs. He was a passionate young man who was outspoken about freedom and justice. He tells us that Syria was an excellent place to live before the war. The country was safe, and it had good health care and education systems. Syrians are warm and friendly, he explains. Safwan and his family made good income and liked their jobs

“In our country, you are always busy with something here, something there. One day, your cousin is getting married. The next day, your brother needs help. You’re always helping with something.”

The weather in Syria, he says, is also beautiful. Safwan followed the events of the revolution closely. People all around Homs were calling for a new government. Graffiti was appearing across city walls. Revolutionary slogans and ideas were unavoidable. Safwan says he was especially disturbed when two young men, accused of spray-painting anti-government messages, were detained and had their fingers cut off. News of this event sparked mass protests in Homs.

“As I told you, we had a very good system and good education, but we still had a dictatorship. We were looking to change the system from a dictatorship into a democratic government.”

Safwan went to a large demonstration in the city centre, where protestors had set up camp with the goal of staying there as long as possible. But a few days into the demonstration, the authorities opened fire on the protestors. The guns came at night. The protestors were disoriented by the darkness. Safwan was at the demonstration with his best friend. He saw his friend shot and killed before his own eyes, he tells us.

In the beginning, Safwan says, protestors were firm about not using violence, preferring peaceful tactics like marches and sit-ins. However, many protestors began gathering weapons as heavier guns and bombs began to be used against them.

“It was very dangerous and becoming more dangerous all the time. There were people with guns everywhere. So, like, a

group of people might take you, hold you somewhere, ask for money. I saw people from all over the world who had come to fight in my country.”

Safwan tells us authorities would frequently stop vehicles for no reason and ask for ID. People not from the area or doing something unusual could be killed or arrested. Safwan’s cousin was a pharmacist. Once, Safwan was borrowing his cousin’s car, a company vehicle with a logo on it. It had pharmaceuticals in the back seat. Safwan was accused of stealing the medicine, and he was put in jail for a short time.

Just being on the streets was dangerous. Another time, Safwan was harassed by a group of armed men looking for trouble.

“They stopped me and said, ‘Give me your Facebook.’ I said, ‘I don’t have Facebook.’ They said, ‘It’s in your pocket. Just give it to us!’ They didn’t know anything. They thought my phone was Facebook.”

One of the most horrendous aspects of living in Homs, Safwan tells us, was the snipers. As the fighting escalated, snipers began hiding in the buildings. It was

not safe to walk anywhere. Across the city, people set up makeshift barriers along sidewalks to protect themselves. Residents were terrified of the snipers. Once, Safwan says, a group of civilians from Homs captured one of the snipers and cut his fingers off to stop him from shooting.

“If there are no people in the street, they shoot the cats, the dogs. No problem. Anything moves, they shoot.”

Safwan decided to escape to Damascus, which was safe compared to Homs. His brother lived in Damascus, so he called for help setting up an apartment. Then he bought an army ID for around \$500 Canadian dollars. Like other people fleeing Homs, Safwan hired a driver to take him to the capital.

Safwan’s family supported his decision to leave.

“They said just go! Just go! Because I am the kind of person who cannot stay silent. They were worried about me. I might say something and get in trouble.”

Damascus may have been safe, he says, but the surrounding areas were not. The east Damascus

neighbourhood of Jobar, which is considered the entrance to the city, was a site of bombing and gunfights. Safwan's trip was delayed by an hour. Safwan lived in Damascus for a year. It was just long enough to prepare for a longer journey to Lebanon. Safwan also married his wife during this time. Due to the grim situation in the country, they got married at a civil registry with no celebrations. It was one day before they left. Once again, Safwan bought an army ID and hired a car to bring him and his wife to their destination of Beirut. They spent a week in a hotel in Beirut and then bought tickets for a flight to Egypt. In Egypt, Safwan and his wife were greeted by another of Safwan's relatives, who helped them get set up in 6th of October. They lived in Egypt for three years.

Safwan, who was a teacher back in Homs, found a full-time job as an administrator at a Syrian school. He enjoyed his life in Egypt. It was safer and more comfortable than Homs even before the war, he tells us. Safwan and his wife had their first child in 6th of October.

However, Safwan's life was shaken by political turmoil once again. A couple years after he came to Egypt, there were mass protests against the Egyptian president.

These protests were more peaceful. Safwan says he did not hear any word of the government or protestors going to the streets with guns. But he worried for the future of his child. With the economic situation in Egypt taking a downturn, Safwan and his wife applied to the UN and were accepted in 2014. They came to Canada because Safwan has an uncle here, who told him that they should not pass up such an opportunity. After receiving their welcome letter, Safwan only had twenty days to get his affairs and documents in order.

There were around twenty refugee families on the plane from Cairo to Toronto. In the airport, Canadian immigration services gave the family winter clothes and other essentials before they boarded another flight to Fredericton, New Brunswick.

Safwan loved Fredericton, he says, even if it was difficult to find work. The family spent seven months there. New Brunswick has a small but established Arabic community, whom Safwan got to know well. He also befriended a Canadian family that he would visit every week. To this day, he calls his friends in Fredericton every month. Another friend of Safwan's told him it was easier to find work in Edmonton, so he moved in 2016. He tells us he was impressed by the

efficiency of the Canadian system and how easy it is to transfer personal and financial information to a new province. In Syria, he explains, most people prefer to do things with paper.

Since living in Edmonton, Safwan has taken full-time language courses to improve his English. He also worked part time as an administrator for the Muslim Association of Canada. Today he is beginning a career in plumbing and is enrolled in an apprenticeship program at NAIT. In his spare time, he volunteers for Catholic Social Services. He likes to help other newcomers fix things around the house or access services.

“Life in Canada is easy. When you buy a car, it’s easy. When you buy a house, it’s easy. It is a working system. If you have money, you’re okay. If you don’t have money, you’re okay. No problem.”

When we spoke to him, Safwan was in the process of becoming a Canadian citizen. He passed his citizenship test in 2020, but the ceremony was delayed due to the

pandemic. Once he is official a citizen, he says, he plans to get a passport and visit his relatives in Egypt.

Khaled Zidar



*“Any place you are, you can
make it better.”*

Khaled spent most of his life in Damascus. He was born there, and so were his parents and grandparents. He tells us life before the war was difficult for them. Syria is a rich country with many resources, he explains, but there was also corruption and inequalities. Earning a living was hard. Khaled worked twelve hours a day to survive. To buy a home, he says, you need to work like this for twenty years.

Khaled left Damascus after two years of warfare. During this time, he tells us, he was deeply worried about the safety of his children. Like others, Khaled believed the situation in Syria would soon improve, but he eventually lost his job, and his home was destroyed. Khaled escaped to Egypt and settled in Cairo with his family.

“The people in Egypt were kind and good to Syrians. Yes, I think Syrians and Egyptians are brothers.”

Like Safwan, Khaled decided to apply to the UN after Egypt began experiencing its own political upheaval. Officials took two years to process Khaled’s application. In Edmonton, the family was received at

the airport by Catholic Social Services. A social worker was assigned to help them with their initial tasks, like finding a place to live.

“It was very cold in the winter. It was not easy for us. But after that, it was not a problem. The cars are warm the buildings are warm. From the day we arrived, we were relaxed. We were happy.”

Khaled tells us he did not speak English when he arrived. He studied EAL at NorQuest college for a few years and then began looking for work. Without any employment history in Canada, Khaled found it difficult to find a job that allowed him to support his family. Today Khaled works for Canada Post. He has saved up and recently put a down payment on a new house. His daughter is studying computer science at MacEwan University and works part time. One of his sons works for a construction company, and his second son recently started a carpet business.

“Many refugee families have difficulty finding work. I’m very happy with where I work. In 2021, for example, I paid about \$10,000 in taxes to the

government. Now my family and I have no help from anyone. All of us have been working for three or four years. I want everyone who is a refugee to eat from working, not from the government.”

Khaled tells us he is happy in Canada. He loves the Syrian community, and in his spare time he volunteers at the Food Bank. He believes the Government of Canada is good to refugees, and he plans to take his citizenship test soon. His only wish is that it were easier to bring his siblings to Canada. Khaled’s family is dispersed around the world—he has two brothers in the Netherlands, one in Egypt, one in Turkey, and a sister in Germany.

Khaled thinks about Syria often. One of his brothers still lives in Damascus. He has a disability and cannot work. Khaled sends him money every month. He tells us that many people in Syria are currently living without electricity, food, heat, and money. People are still afraid of the authorities.

“I like having a new life here. But at the same time, I believe my past life was also beautiful. Sometimes I want to return to Damascus. I spent fifty years of my life in Damascus. It’s not easy.”

Khaled offers this final message to the readers:

“If anyone has a problem, they can find solutions if they ask for help and don’t stop working. Any place you are, you can make it better.”

Rana Edris



“When my son grows up, I will tell him a story about me.”

“When my son grows up, I will tell him a story about me. Because he will miss all the things I left behind. He will miss Syria, especially our family. So first of all, I will tell him that my life in Damascus was amazing. I lived a beautiful life.”

Rana was a young woman when the war started.

She lived in an eastern suburb of Damascus called Abbasiyyin with her husband and three children. The family owned a series of properties. They had their own house and a stable fixed income. Rana tells us her life was comfortable. She was independent and proud of herself. She was confident her children would live a comfortable life too. When the fighting started, Rana was not afraid.

“I consider myself a strong woman. So in the beginning, I didn’t worry about what was happening. I believed in God, and for this I was strong.”

Rana’s three children were terrified, however. The sound of bombs throughout the city made them cry. They would watch television and see the events

unfolding on the news. They heard reports of heavy fighting in the city of Dara and then in Homs. They also saw the soldiers around Damascus.

“We felt that, maybe, we would die any minute. I wasn’t afraid. But I was worried about my children.”

The family relocated to Jobar, a suburb not far from Abbasiyyin. They stayed until Jobar became a site of heavy bombing in 2012. They left Syria convinced, like many, that the situation would soon improve. In the years after they left, the majority of Jobar was bombed into ruins.

Rana and her family travelled by plane to Amman in Jordan, where they tried hard to make things work. Her husband opened a short-lived business. But life in Jordan was far more expensive than back home, and they struggled with finances as well as cultural differences. A family friend told them it would be easier in Egypt, so after three months they took a boat to the city of Aqaba and continued to 6th of October. Rana hoped for a life similar to what she knew in Damascus.

But even in Egypt, Rana worried about the safety

of her children. She had heard negative things about public schools in Egypt, including drugs and sexual abuse. Rana enrolled her kids in a private Syrian school, which had a curriculum and culture more familiar to her children. A school bus picked up and dropped off the kids every day.

One day, Rana tells us, her greatest fears were realized when her oldest son Youssef was kidnapped. The kidnappers called Rana's husband.

“When this happened, he didn't tell me. I was outside. Youssef was supposed to come home in about 15 minutes. My husband realized that he wasn't coming home. He called his cellphone many times but no one answered. After two hours, Youssef called his father to say someone had kidnapped him. He overheard a man say, ‘The goods are with me, everything is ready.’ And my son, he knows what people do with children.”

Youssef escaped on his own. He ran out the door of the building he was in while the kidnappers were talking. They pursued the boy, but he knew the area well. He hid among the buildings until the kidnappers gave up, and then he called his father from a shop. The whole event lasted about six hours. Rana, who didn't know

what was happening, says it felt like six years.

Aside from this horrifying event, the family lived a stable life in 6th of October for four years. Rana tells us she has especially vivid memories of the Egyptian nights. People in Egypt are very active at night, she explains, and you can see them enjoying the city and going for walks, especially in the summertime. Rana says that, if she were to bring us to 6th of October, we would take in the natural views and go to an excellent Syrian restaurant.

When Rana was invited by the UN to come to Canada, she was only just adapting to life in Egypt. Canada was the ultimate dream, however.

“Syrians, they consider Canada a paradise. Especially if they have children.”

They arrived in Edmonton on December 1, 2016. Rana tells us it was disorienting at first. Social services brought them to a refugee reception house for a few days, but Rana couldn't tell if she was happy, sad, or shocked.

“I couldn’t explain this feeling because everything was—now. We were waiting for something, but we didn’t know what we were waiting for.”

She felt more at home once they secured their own house.

Once, during the first year in Edmonton, Rana’s children got lost on public transit. It was the middle of winter. All of Rana’s friends in the Syrian community volunteered to go searching for the children. They drove all around the north and west ends before finding the children at the West Edmonton Mall transit centre. A bus driver had advised them to wait there. This day reminded Rana of losing her son in Egypt.

“In both situations, I was afraid my children were dying. When it happened in Egypt, I thought someone would kill them. Here in Canada, I just imagined my children in the snow, very cold, and dying.”

Rana tells us she felt deeply sad during her first few years in Edmonton because she wasn’t able to communicate with people. She advises any future

newcomers to try to work on their English beforehand to avoid the loneliness.

Today, however, Rana is hopeful. Her English has improved and, as we spoke to her, she was in school to become a lab assistant. She hopes her children also go to university one day. One of them wants to be an engineer, one of them a dentist, and the third is still deciding. Rana also hopes to bring her mother to Canada someday. Her mother is still living in Jordan.

Rana is loved by the Syrian community in Edmonton. She takes part in regular English conversation classes at the library, and she volunteers to help other newcomer women learn to drive.

Khaled Almansour



“A person’s work is their decoration.”

“We saw with our own eyes what happened in Manbij.”

Before the war, Khaled lived in a small city in the north of Syria, between Aleppo and the Euphrates River. Before 2011, Khaled and his wife were Arabic teachers at an elementary school. They were passionate about their work and about building a good future for young Syrians. Khaled tells us his dream was simply a nice life for his children.

Manbij saw extensive fighting over the course of the war, and various groups fought to dominate his region. Early on in the conflict, Manbij fell under the control of the Free Syrian Army, a group dedicated to fighting the regime. The government’s army retaliated by sending in air strikes and soldiers. Bombs were also placed all around the city. Khaled tells us he saw people killed in the streets—often young men who were forced into fighting. All the schools, stores, and hospitals were closed.

In 2016, ISIS gained control of Manbij and surrounding areas, pushing out the Free Syrian Army. ISIS took control of all government activities including education.

Teachers like Khaled and his wife were supposed to teach a curriculum they believed was bad for children. If they refused, they could be punished. At that time, Khaled was also seeking urgent hospital treatment for his son Mohammed. The hospitals where he lived would not respond to Khaled's requests for treatment.

Khaled knew there was no legal way to leave Manbij. Soldiers were patrolling the roads. The only option was to escape on foot. The first time they tried, they walked through the night for six hours toward a village they hoped would be safe. But as they approached the village, soldiers saw them and started shooting. The family fell to the ground and waited until the shooting stopped and then walked back to Manbij. They tried again a few days later. This time they walked at night, in the dark, listening to wild animals including snakes. The path was full of rocks, Khaled tells us. The family arrived at Azaz, a city north of Aleppo, about three hours after sunrise.

From Azaz, they took a bus to Damascus. Khaled's father-in-law, who was with them, needed cancer treatment that was only available in the capital.

Khaled and his wife managed to secure him treatment after a few months, and then he returned to Manbij.

The family planned to continue to Lebanon. However, accessing Lebanon from Damascus required many documents, and Khaled's family was ineligible. They were again forced to find an alternative route on foot.

Damascus and the border of Lebanon are separated by treacherous mountain paths. Khaled tells us his family experienced severe pain and dehydration during the journey, which took seven hours. They finally rested at a village on the Lebanese side of the border in a house that had been set up for refugees. In the morning, they took a bus to Beirut.

In Beirut, Khaled's family stayed with his wife's cousin. He was one of many Syrians already living in the city before the war. Many more Syrians were arriving along with Khaled and his family. The high amount of people made it difficult to find a place to live, Khaled explains. They eventually found a house, but it was small and derelict. He tells us that his house would leak whenever it rained. The floor was made of metal. Mice and snakes would often find their way in.

After six months, Khaled and his wife found work as teachers. They could finally upgrade to a more comfortable house in the neighbourhood of Bir Hassan.

But money was still tight. Khaled and his wife both needed to work full time just to make enough for food and rent. This was their reality for three years, until they received a welcome letter from the UN to come to Canada.

Khaled tells us he received plenty of care and support when he got to Canada. Immigration services settled his family in Calgary. They lived in a hotel while social services helped them find a house. Khaled says he is especially thankful to Arabic-speaking service workers, who helped him find a job and understand Canadian society.

Khaled tells us he thinks Calgary is a beautiful city. He is grateful to the Canadian government for its approach to refugees. Both children and adults live amazing lives here, he says, and the justice system works well. Khaled's goal is to improve his English so he can build a career and give back to society. As a teacher, Khaled takes pride in his work. There is an Arabic expression he likes, which translates to "a person's work is their decoration."

“In the end, I would like to thank anyone who has helped us in our journey and welcomed us. Thank you for having this meeting.”

Abdul Fattah



*“All my dad cared about was saving us from
the war.”*

Abdul describes to us his grandparents' house. His grandfather had built it, and Abdul would visit them often.

“It had beautiful gardens and every kind of fruit you can imagine. Plums, lemons. Everything.”

Like Abdul, they lived in Aleppo, which Abdul says was a safe and joyful place when he was a child. He lived in a large house with his parents, two sisters, and brother. He has vivid memories of his childhood home: the balcony, the family computer that he and his siblings would play with, and the pet bird, which they had to leave behind.

Abdul was too young to imagine the scope of what was happening in Syria, but he knew things had gone wrong. Aleppo, like Manbij, was controlled by the Free Syrian Army in 2012 and was dominated by various groups over the next four years. Abdul tells us there were relentless bombings, and whole families would go into hiding. One of Abdul's sisters was a baby at the time.

“Every night. And the kids were very scared. Some people went and hid in the bathroom because it was the safest place because it had no windows.”

Today, Abdul’s childhood home is still standing, but it is abandoned.

“It is in the same spot, but now the windows are all broken because of the sound from the bombs. It is very sad to see your city go through those things. There wasn’t a system that could provide protection.”

He tells us that his grandparents’ house did not survive. Soldiers had ransacked the gardens and stolen the furniture. A few years later, the house was destroyed by a bomb.

The family left Aleppo in 2013. Abdul’s father decided to move the family to a nearby village called Kafra, hoping it would be safer than in the city. They lived there for a year before briefly returning to Aleppo and then escaping to Turkey.

“My dad wasn’t scared of anything. All he was focused

on was saving us from the war. From losing our future. I owe him a lot for knowing that we would be better off in a different place.”

The journey from Aleppo to Turkey took two days. They drove through the night.

“We had only one choice. We had only a car. A Mazda 3 from 1980. My dad is interested in cars, so—that’s the car we had, and we moved to Turkey with that car.”

“We travelled for two days. My mom and dad were in the front. We were in the back. It was hard at nights. We had some food with us. We made some so we wouldn’t get hungry. But we eventually ran out and had no food for a day.”

“On the way, there were strangers waiting on the road. They wanted to check in our car, see what he had, and take out all our stuff. Just to check it all and put it back in. Some of them asked for money. One time, someone asked for cigarettes because he didn’t have a chance to buy his own. They all had guns, and they were waiting for cars to come—to check on them.”

“When we went across the border, we saw people welcoming us, saying hi and stuff, but I can’t remember exactly what they were saying. Then we went to a restaurant because we had not eaten.

The family’s destination was Izmir, a large coastal city in the west of Turkey. There they started from zero, Abdul says. They had no belongings, and no one in the family was able to speak Turkish. At that time, the war in Syria had just started, so there were relatively few Syrian refugees in Izmir.”

“First day we rented the house, we had nothing except a fridge. That’s all. Even the water heater, you had to buy your own. So, the water was cold and the house was empty. But we had some neighbours. They were very nice to us. They spoke a little bit of Arabic. Their daughter was in university, and she used to come and teach us Turkish. And as we made money, we bought furniture.”

Abdul was the only Syrian student at the first school he attended in Izmir. The first class of the day was math.

“I took a paper from someone and drew on it. X, plus, minus, division. I didn’t speak Turkish at all, even the

alphabet. I went to my teacher, and he understood. The teacher was so nice to me. He was so nice to me. It was my favourite class. But then I got to music class, and, like, they were bullying me and making fun of me. In Syria, we didn't have a chance to learn about music."

"All I was doing for those first few years was walking through the sky, thinking, "What am I doing here? I want to go back."

Abdul also says he faced discrimination at school.

"First, they were making fun of my name. They were not used to those kinds of names. So we were getting into fights. They told me to go back to my country. What are you doing here? Some people said I should go back to Syria and fight and not be afraid of the war. I didn't have an answer to this. It was horrible. So I stayed quiet."

Abdul turned to books and studying to cope with the difficulties.

"In the end, I went to a library. I got a bunch of books, science books, and an Arabic-Turkish dictionary. I stayed up 'til 3 a.m., studying every night just to learn

the language perfectly. Then, one day, I was able to write, speak, and read Turkish. The teachers were amazed by how much I wanted to be a perfect Turkish student. I was in grade 5.”

The year he entered grade 6, Abdul’s parents sent him to a boarding school. He says it was strict and severe. The students would be punished if they didn’t eat every bit of food they were served. He only went back to Izmir on weekends.

Meanwhile, Abdul’s parents were working hard to eke out a living. His father borrowed money to start a restaurant. Once, his father was scammed by his business partner, who disappeared with half the cash. Abdul says the restaurant struggled.

“Some Turkish people came. But because it was Arabic-Syrian, people didn’t come very much. It was a different culture and food.”

Abdul’s father applied to the UN in 2015. He kept it a secret because he wanted to make it a surprise. When the family was in Istanbul before their flight, they stayed in a hotel.

“We had not seen something so nice before. We had two rooms, and we just had fun for two days.”

From Istanbul, they flew to Edmonton via Germany. It was the first time Abdul had been on an airplane. He remembers his father carrying his sister’s baby out of the plane while Abdul and his siblings followed after with the luggage. He remembers his whole family feeling happy. They arrived in Edmonton on December 25, 2016. The city was filled with Christmas lights.

“In Izmir you would never see snow. Mostly rain. So, when we came to Edmonton, we were happy to see the snow. And now we just complain about the snow all day long!”

The family stayed in the refugee reception house for a few days. They didn’t sleep much, Abdul says, but they were taken care of by Catholic Social Services, which also helped them move in. On the day they moved in, social services delivered beds, blankets, and anything else the family needed. They lived in that house for a year.

Abdul entered grade 8 shortly after he arrived. The

school put him in an EAL program, but he progressed quickly because he had studied English in Syria. He was soon put into English classrooms. Abdul found math, especially, to be easy in Canada.

“I did my high school here, and I just finished a couple months ago. I got my diploma, and it made me proud. I achieved something. I feel way better than I did in Turkey. And my friends there all see me differently now.”

Abdul is extremely goal-oriented. In high school, he worked at an ice cream shop during the summers to save up for a car. Now he is studying at the University of Alberta, hoping to become a dentist or a pharmacist.

“I have goal one, goal two, goal three. If I achieve just one of them, it means I did something. I don’t like wasting time.”

At the end of our discussion, Abdul sings us a song. His voice is soft, and the song is quiet over Zoom. It is a famous song about his home, he says when he is finished.

A translation of “Oh my Home, Oh my Home” is included at the beginning of this book.

Mohammad Ismaeil



*“The Canadian government has offered all
the best to us.”*

Mohammed tells us he has deep roots to Damascus. He was born and raised there, and he traces his lineage in the area back three hundred years. For thirty years, he helped run the family shoe factory with his father, which was inherited from his grandfather. They lived and worked in the Jobar neighbourhood. Mohammed envisioned a long future for his children in Jobar as well. Although he knew about tension and corruption in society, Mohammed explains, he was not interested in politics as long as business was good and the country was peaceful.

Bombing in Jobar started in 2013. In Mohammed's eyes, the military had come to see the people of Jobar as valueless objects. He tells us he witnessed planes indiscriminately dropping bombs over the neighbourhood. He saw people shot dead in the streets at random. Once, he says, he was exiting a mosque after prayer to find the street full of the bodies of people who had just been executed. Many of Mohammed's cousins and peers were killed or injured. Mohammed tells us that his shoe factory, like most of Jobar, was destroyed. The factory was a large building. When it collapsed from a bomb, all the machinery was buried under cement. All of Mohammed's relatives and

friends have also left Jobar. Many from his mother's side went to Egypt. His sisters when to Lebanon and Turkey. One of his brothers also joined his sisters in Turkey.

At first, Mohammed escaped by himself to Egypt. He lived alone in Cairo, setting up a place to live and establishing a business. He couldn't find work in his industry, so he set up shop as a tailor. His family joined him after two months. They lived in Egypt for five years before applying to the UN. They were accepted to come to Canada in 2016. Mohammed tells us he and his family were among a small group of Syrians in Edmonton at the time, and he got to see the community grow.

Today, Mohammed runs a small shoe store using some of the equipment he brought from Egypt and Syria. To expand his business, Mohammed tells us, he now also offers shoe repair, key cutting, and clothing alteration. He is also an active volunteer for social services working with refugees, helping newcomers connect to doctors, apply for insurance, apply for the Food Bank, and run errands.

Mohammed says he is grateful to the Government

of Canada for supporting Syrian refugees and other communities around the world.

“The Canadian government has offered all the best to us, and we would like to thank them for that. With their support and understanding, we are now here.”

As a final message to the reader, Mohammed would like to offer his best wishes to any newcomers who plan to start a business in Canada.

Abd Alraheem



*“My land is not what gives me my
nationality, my land is what gives me
my safety.”*

“People all over Syria were just killing each other. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to go and kill my people, my brothers. I don’t know how else to express it.”

Abd spent his youth in the city of Latakia, the biggest city on the coast of Syria. He did high school there and then started culinary school. In Syria, he explains, men are required to go to the military when they are eighteen unless they are in school. Abd was deeply opposed to the violence, so he went into hiding after he graduated in 2011. He was twenty-one years old.

Abd spent three years doing everything he could to avoid the draft. The only certain way, he says, was by paying a \$10,000 fee, which he could not afford. Abd said he would hide out wherever he could, sometimes even sleeping on the rooftops. He left Latakia alone when he was twenty-four.

“My parents didn’t decide to stay, but it’s hard to make it happen. To leave. When my siblings left to Turkey, they took an illegal route and they walked. My parents are just normal people. They cannot walk for ten or fifteen hours.”

Abd saved up enough money to pay someone for a passport and to hire a car that was taking refugees from Damascus to Lebanon. There were four people in the car with him. The journey took about ten hours. The passengers got off at the border. However, this border point was not letting refugees pass, so they walked for an hour to find a vehicle that could take them to a different border point.

At the second border point, soldiers had halted a large group of people trying to cross. The soldiers, Abd says, liked to play with the feelings of refugees.

“We were almost fifty people in a line. And the soldier, he said, ‘Choose ten people from among you, and I will send them back to Syria.’ He said you choose. All of us. We asked him why. He said, ‘Because I like it, I want to do it.’ And, you know, the women started to cry. There was one man there with his wife and his mother. It’s hard, you know, to choose. After about ten minutes, he said, ‘Okay, I will choose.’ And he chose ten people. Then he let us wait there for almost two hours. After that he said, ‘I’m just kidding with you.’”

Once he crossed the border, Abd found a ride to Tripoli. He stayed there for a night before continuing

by boat to Turkey. After a fifteen-hour trip, he landed in the city of Mersin. From there, he took a bus to the city of Kayseri in Anatolia.

After six months in Kayseri, Abd got married. They soon had a daughter. Like many refugees, Abd and his family lived a frugal life in Turkey. He tells us he was paid little for his work—only enough for his bills, rent, and food. Abd learned Turkish while working in a restaurant from a co-worker who taught him while they were on shift. He tells us he still prays for this man.

When Abd applied to the UN, his family was first accepted to go to the United States. They completed their interviews and waited a month before the UN called to say the United States has closed its borders to Syrian refugees. The agent on the phone told them that Canada was now another option. He was interviewed again two days later and given a month and a half to prepare his things.

“You know, coming to Canada was a dream for me, even before I moved to Turkey. Sometimes in Turkey, I worked almost fifteen to sixteen hours per day. And when I came home from work, my wife and I would go

for a walk. We couldn't go to a restaurant or the malls to buy something. We would just go for a walk. And often I would say, 'Okay, where do you want to go? To France? Okay, let's go to France!' We would just talk about it. And the very last time, I said, 'Let's go to Canada.' That was one day before we applied. Abd remembered this conversation when he and his wife landed in Edmonton."

"I told her, 'I kept my word.' She said, 'Of course, yes.' She was happy too, of course."

He says he and his wife felt overwhelmed when they first arrived. They were exhausted and had not slept for three days. It was wintertime, and Abd thought about Turkey when he saw the snow. He tells us it snows more in Kayseri than in Edmonton.

"The feeling I experienced when I came to Canada—the first thing is, I am a human again. That's the first thing. There is no one to tell you that, because you are Syrian, you don't deserve this or don't deserve that."

Abd and his wife now have three children. They

received their Canadian citizenship in 2021. Abd has completed English certificates from Concordia University and NAIT. His plan is to continue his studies and become an MRI technician.

In Syria, Abd worked as a chef. He tells us that, someday, he dreams of opening an authentic Middle Eastern restaurant in Edmonton. It will serve high-quality Arabic food on a budget.

“We have lots of good food, you know. We have mansaf. Maybe I’ll serve biryani. I’ll put in some French, because they taught us French food in school.”

“No, no, I would not go small. If you want it to work, you have to be the best. If you’re not the best, don’t do it. We have in Edmonton two or three good restaurants like this. Fast food, but they are good. Like Turquoise, Best Kabab, El Fino. They are fast food, but good. And the people, they go there often. Me, I don’t want a small restaurant. I want twenty to thirty tables at least. In the future, inshallah, I will do it.”

Abd says that, if he makes his restaurant, we are invited.

Along with working and studying, Abd is involved in his community. He works with researchers from the university looking into issues impacting newcomers. He also volunteers to help Syrian refugees find accommodation and apply for work. In 2017, he volunteered for a program to help Syrian refugees experiencing trauma and PTSD.

We asked Abd if he has a final message for the readers of this book.

“Maybe I can add an idiom: ‘My land is not what gives me my nationality, my land is what gives me my safety.’ My land is what gives me the right to be human. Almost everyone asks me if I want to return to Syria. I say no, I don’t. For Abd Alraheem, for me, the country I belong to is the country that gives me safety and humanity. And this is Canada. I’m proud to be Canadian. This is my message.”

Mohammed Alameer



“What I like most in Canada is that they respect people as human beings.”

Before the war, Mohammed and his family ran their own accounting business in Jobar. Every year, he explained, life would get a little better. He lived in a house with his wife and kids, and they were looking forward to their future. Jobar was peaceful, Mohammed says, and life was content. When the war began, Mohammed moved into a big three-story house with his parents and siblings for safety.

Mohammed witnessed many things in Jobar. Because he lived near a police station, he explained, he would constantly see and hear gunfights. The building of his accounting business was levelled by bombs. He told us that he spent a lot of time on the ground, avoiding gunfire. Once, he and his father laid on the ground for two hours because a long gunfight broke out around them. On another occasion, he saw a large bomb ignite and destroy a mosque in his neighbourhood. Mohammed's hand is damaged because it was struck by shrapnel from a nearby explosion. He tells us he saw many people killed before his eyes while in Jobar, including his uncle and one of his cousins.

One day in 2013, at 5 a.m., Mohammed and his family boarded a bus to Beirut. He says the trip was

dangerous and painful. Throughout Syria, lining the villages, were armed soldiers who would stop, search, and abuse people trying to escape.

“If they don’t like you, or they don’t like the people with you, they take you and they kill you.”

They made it to the Beirut airport fifteen minutes before their flight to Amman, Jordan. He eventually found a job as a technician for industrial air fans and also worked as a cashier, bank teller, construction worker, and baker.

Mohammed’s parents joined him in Amman. His mother applied to the UN because she needed cancer treatment that was unavailable in Jordan. She was selected to move to Canada, but the UN only let her bring one of her sons. Mohammed tells us that his culture and religion teach him to sacrifice for others and be generous. Both brothers wanted the other brother to go to Canada—in the end, they asked the UN to make the decision, and officials chose Mohammed and his family. A large bus took Mohammed’s family to the airport, along with a group

of other refugee families, where they boarded a flight to Calgary via Istanbul and Toronto.

Mohammed arrived in Canada at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus had disrupted immigration services and created delays. From the Calgary airport, the family was brought to a hotel in Red Deer. The family was feeling sick and was tested positive for COVID-19. They were quarantined to hotel rooms. Mohammed took care of them during this time, handling all the cooking and cleaning. He tells us that the hotel only provided breakfast, so a lot of his time was spent making meals in the hotel room as well as taking care of his affairs with hotel staff and immigration services. The hotel was also having phone problems at the time, so Mohammed was unable to make calls or even speak to reception.

Eventually, Mohammed got in touch with someone he knew in Edmonton, who contacted a few social service organizations. Catholic Social Services and the United Cultures of Canada Association helped Mohammed relocate to Edmonton, find a place to rent, and more. Hasan was the one who drove to Red Deer to pick up Mohammed and his family, who had been stranded for several weeks. Mohammed ended up moving into the

same apartment as his parents. The Syrian community later took him to IKEA, Hasan tells us.

Sadly, Mohammed and his family experienced another horrible event since coming to Edmonton. In 2021, a man from their apartment killed himself by jumping from the ninth floor. Mohammed says his family didn't see the event firsthand. They woke up to loud banging on the door. Mohammed's wife ran to put on her hijab, he explains, and then peeked through the door. The police quickly huddled their way. They confined the family to their suite until the situation was over. The event distressed Mohammed and his family.

Mohammed is currently working multiple jobs to support his family. One of them is as a food delivery driver. He is studying at NorQuest to improve his English. He tells us it is easy to feel tired from all the work. But he is grateful to be living in peace.

“What I like most in Canada is that they respect people as human beings. That was something they took from us in Syria. In Canada, when you go to the shop, people welcome you. They give you all kinds

of hospitality, respect for a human as a human. That's what I like about Canada.”

Mohammed has several goals, he says. He wants to bring his brother, who lives in Jordan, to Canada. He also wants to improve his English so he can advance in his career and hopefully open an accounting business like he had in Damascus. Hasan adds that Mohammed is also an active member of the Syrian community.

Within a year of arriving to Canada, he was already volunteering with the United Cultures of Canada Association to deliver food and other essential to refugee families affected by the pandemic.

“If I am a successful person, I can give back to Canada. I want to support the economy of Canada. Any chance I get to support Canadian society, I will volunteer for that.”

He tells us he misses Syria every day. The place he once knew has been so affected by the war that it is hard to recognize what he once loved, he explained. Many of his former friends and neighbours from Jobar are now scattered around the world. Many people who were

living peaceful and satisfying lives in Damascus are now poor and struggling in other countries, Mohammed explains.

*“I know Canada has given us a new life.
But I still miss my country. I miss my job, I
miss my friends.”*

Amin Youssef



*“At least, if I die, they will say I died with
my dream.”*

Amin comes from the small city of Quneitra in the Golan Heights in the south-west corner of Syria. He lived with his wife and children. Hasan explains that Amin's region saw particularly high rates of poverty. There were high crime rates and ill will between communities and political groups. Before the war, there were almost 100,000 people in Quneitra. Today, nearly every building Quneitra is damaged or destroyed and the city is mostly abandoned. Amin tells us his parents still live there.

Amin was serving in the army when the war broke out. He was opposed to new rules that required soldiers to take actions Amin found horrible. He says soldiers who disobeyed the rules could be imprisoned, executed, or tortured. Amin had been arrested once before and spent a month in jail.

Amin's best friend Waleed was also in the Syrian army. Bombing near Waleed's house had injured his wife and child, and he was trying to resist the draft to take care of them, Amin explains. The bombing had made Waleed's wife deaf. Waleed's daughter lost the use of her legs. Waleed, like Amin, was also horrified by the new rules for soldiers.

Amin and Waleed decided to escape to Lebanon together. They were twenty-four and twenty-five years old at this time. Amin contacted his family the day before leaving to tell them. They thought he was joking, he tells us, because the region was so dangerous. There was a large chance he would be killed.

The friends escaped by car. They were stopped three times and interrogated. Their car was searched for weapons and valuables. Each time they were stopped, they were held for hours. At the border, they were brought into a building and interrogated. It took them a day and a half to get to Lebanon.

“But we had a dream. Our dream was before our eyes. When I felt hopeless, I reminded myself of the dream, and I said to myself, ‘Let what will happen—happen. At least, if I die, they will say I died with my dream.’”

Amin and Waleed lived in Beirut for two and a half

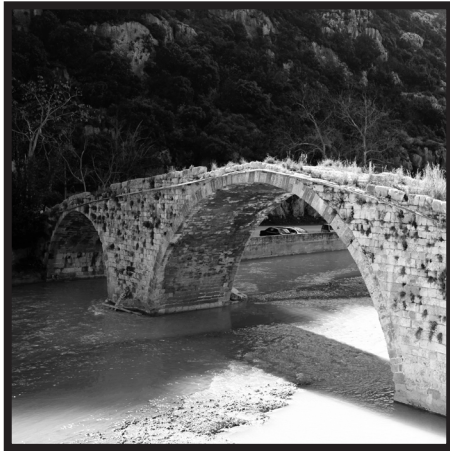
years. They struggled to find work, he says. For the first month, they lived in a small single-room apartment. They slept on the floor and had no money for clothes. Amin found odd jobs, sometimes working only one day a month. All of his money went to groceries, which he would eat until his next paycheck. Waleed's wife and daughter eventually came to Beirut too. For a while, Amin lived with Waleed's family. Amin applied to the UN in 2015, but Waleed says his family was not eligible.

Since arriving in Edmonton, Amin has taken English courses and held down various jobs. He first worked in construction, and now he works in a restaurant. Life is much better in Canada, he tells us. He says that he has accessed mental health care to address what he experienced in jail.

Amin is now engaged to Waleed's wife's sister. She lives in Beirut with the other two. Amin tells us his primary goal today is to help his wife and best friend come to Canada. Since he arrived, Amin has been sending much of his income to Lebanon to support them. Waleed's wife and daughter have disabilities, and the family is struggling financially.

As we speak to him, Amin is with them in Beirut. He is helping them access health care. He says they are having trouble getting what they need because of the pandemic.

Ghada A.



“War is for nothing, you know.”

Ghada's story begins in 1948 when her grandparents, who were Palestinian refugees, fled conflict in Lebanon and settled in Damascus. Growing up, Ghada spent many summers in Lebanon visiting her grandmother, whom she tells us was very sick and bedridden. She says she visited her grandmother each summer for twenty years before she passed away.

Ghada moved to Lebanon herself in the 1970s to study at the university in Beirut. Her dad wanted her to become a doctor, but Ghada didn't like the sight of blood.

"I said to my dad, 'I'll help people all my life until the end of my life'—but not in this way."

After a year of medical school, Ghada switched to studying politics and sociology. She began building a career in social services and following her life mission to relieve suffering wherever she finds it.

"When I see people around me happy, I feel happy. When I see everybody safe, everybody okay, I feel happy. People ask

me, ‘Ghada, I have a question. You are always taking care of families, of refugees, but what about yourself? I say, really, I do nothing for myself. But I’m happy.’

Ghada was living in Lebanon when the civil war started there in 1975. She enlisted in the Red Cross so she could help people whose lives were disrupted by fighting. She helped create an organization specifically serving women and families. Ghada tells us a story about a tragedy she witnessed around this time. In 1982, she and her mother were returning to Syria. They were crossing the border while the civil war was still raging.

“Syria and Lebanon are very close. But you have to stop at the border and show your documents and everything. So I went to the supermarket nearby to get some juice with my mom. When we were in the market, soldiers came and bombed the area. You don’t imagine. When I went back outside, I saw everybody, the people, the vehicles, even the car with my documents from university—everything was black. You couldn’t see anything.”

“You can’t imagine. I felt sick about it for more than ten years. I was so sad. I cried for ten years. I haven’t forgotten this sight. Until now, in my dream, I see this sight. On the border between Syria and Lebanon.”

Ghada tells us she had been wondering her whole life why events like this happen.

“It’s too bad, really. War is for nothing, you know. Because people can be free. Everybody can live in this world safely and happily. I don’t know what the answer is. I’ve tried to find the answer, but I don’t know. All of the Middle East is now at war. Syria is the most beautiful country. And Lebanon. The people were so happy. I don’t know what happened.”

When Ghada’s mother was fifty-five, she immigrated to Canada and settled in Quebec. Ghada’s mother spoke French. In the old times, Ghada says, the schools in Lebanon taught French because the country was once controlled by France. Ghada can also speak French, but growing up she chose to study English because she loved it, she says.

Ghada tells us her mother was lonely in Canada during those years.

“My mom, like me, has two daughters and five sons. We were all very close. In Canada, she lived with my oldest brother, but she wasn’t happy because she was lonely. If you have a big family, it is hard to live by yourself. My brother went to his job all day until after midnight, and she was suffering, you know. But she had to stay here because she applied for all of us—my brothers and sisters—they came to Canada in 1993. My mom said she would like to pass away in her country, in Syria or Lebanon, but she passed away here in 2015. It was June 18.”

Ghada came to Canada as a visitor in 2007. She came to look after her mother. By this time, much of Ghada’s family was already living here. But her mother was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease and specifically asked for Ghada to stay with her. While Ghada was caring for her mother, the war broke out in Syria and she was unable to go home.

“I stayed with my mom in the hospital for more than three years. It was my home. Later they took her from the hospital to a senior home. She needed a special machine to take a shower, or whatever. We couldn’t bring the machine to the house, so that’s why I stayed with her. All the night and all the day. When she passed

away, she was 84.”

Since living in Canada, Ghada has helped many of her relatives and their families apply through the UN. She has helped more than fifty Syrian families escape war and poverty. She says she has stories about each one of them, and one day she plans to write a book about them. In one case, she says, she helped her former neighbours from Damascus. While the family was in Syria, the father had been arrested, while his wife and kids escaped to Jordan. When the father was released, he was unable to find his family. Ghada says she spent three years helping this family reconnect, and later she applied for them to come to Canada.

Ghada stays close to everyone she has helped.

“My phone is open 24/7 for them to call. Everybody who needs help calls me, so I hope.”

Ghada tells us she had many friends in Canada, which she says is due to the fact that she is always looking out for others. She feels loved and respected by the Syrian community in Edmonton. She also likes to build

bridges. One of her favourite things to do is meet with a group of interfaith seniors to help them practice English and celebrate special occasions.

Ghada is also very proud of her family. Her eldest son, who was born in Damascus in 1975, is a professional musician who plays Arabic and Canadian styles of music. He lives in Montreal, speaks French, and is well-known in the music community. He recently went on tour in Lebanon, where he appeared on television four hours a day for a month.

One of Ghada's greatest dreams, she tells us, is for her grandchildren in Dubai to come to Canada. She also wants to buy a larger house for her family. Finally, she hopes to establish an English-language school for newcomer seniors in Edmonton. She tells us that seniors need a lot of help socializing and adapting.

“Really, seniors are the people who are the saddest. You wouldn't imagine. They call me crying sometimes. We are lonely, we are bored.”

Ghada tells us that, for the rest of her life, she will remain committed to helping families around the world escape conflict and poverty and live more peaceful lives.

This work, she explains, is not always easy.

“Recently, there was a man I know—he called me from Lebanon. He needed help getting a doctor. But now there isn’t enough money to help him. I can’t find the money—because of the coronavirus. I feel sad and sorry. Sometimes I cry about this. I would like to have lots of money and be able to help all those people who call. Even my kids. I can’t help them. It’s sad.”

“But we hope that someday, inshallah, everything will become better.”

“Refugees need to share these stories so they are not forgotten.”

- Hasan Al Ebrahim, community leader



Coming Home to Edmonton collects the personal stories of thirteen Syrian refugees who have settled in Edmonton and around Alberta since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. Their narratives capture the power of community, hospitality, and perseverance in the face of unthinkable loss.

Readers are invited to take their time, listen deeply, and remember.

Coming Home to Edmonton was prepared with care by the United Cultures of Canada Association (UCCA).

www.ucca.ca

ISBN 979-888757836-1

