

Escape From a War Zone

Since 2011, more than 4 million people have fled Syria to escape violence. Now countries around the world are debating where they should end up.



Smoke rises after a bombing in Daraa, Syria, last June.

Nine-year-old Reem Kaabor was about to leave home, and she had no idea if she would ever return. All she could take with her was a backpack with one change of clothes. It was November 2013, and Reem's parents had made the difficult decision to leave their country, Syria. A civil war had been raging in their homeland for more than two years. Reem's school was shut down, and her father could no longer find work as a truck driver. Their once-peaceful city of Daraa had become a war zone.

"There was a lot of fighting very close to where we were

Words to Know

discrimination (dis-krim-ih-NAY-shuhn) *noun*. unjust behavior toward others based on differences such as race, religion, or nationality

polls (pohlz) *noun, plural*. surveys of people's opinions or beliefs

living," said Reem, who's now 12. She spoke through an interpreter because she speaks only Arabic. "There were a lot of rockets. We were so afraid that our house might become a target."

Reem, her parents, her older sister, Rama, and her three younger siblings now live in Texas. But their long, difficult journey to build a new life in the U.S. took nearly two years.

People who have escaped from war or other dangers in their homelands, like the Kaabors, are called refugees. More than 4 million refugees have fled from Syria since the war began. Most face uncertain futures in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Others are part of the wave of refugees flooding into countries in Europe.

The Kaabors are among more than 2,000 Syrian refugees who've



been allowed to settle in the U.S. since 2011. Now many people are asking: What should happen to the rest of them?

A Difficult Journey

When the Kaabors left home, they set out for Jordan, which borders Syria to the south. They planned to meet up with Reem's uncle, who was living in Amman, Jordan's capital.

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The trip through the war zone was painfully slow. Traveling by foot and bus, the Kaabors needed 23 days to reach Amman. Along the way, supplies ran low.

“When we got to the desert, we had difficulty getting water,” says Reem. “And there wasn’t enough food for everybody.”

Syrians who flee to Jordan must check into a refugee camp. The Kaabors spent their first night in the country in a camp called Zaatari (ZAT-ur-ee). They slept on the floor of a cramped tent in the cold. The family stayed only one night before continuing on to Amman. But for about 80,000 refugees, Zaatari has become their new home.

In Amman, Reem’s father found jobs in construction and at a restaurant. Reem and her siblings could go to school again. But like many refugees, the family faced **discrimination** in Jordan.

“The other kids would say, ‘Why are you coming here? This is not your country, this is our country,’” says Reem.

Reem’s father thought about moving his family to Europe. But instead he decided to apply for a permit for them to live in the U.S.



For refugees, the process of being admitted to the U.S. can take more than two years. It involves many layers of security checks and interviews with U.S. officials. The goal is to make sure the refugees have truly escaped danger in their homeland and aren’t a threat to the U.S.

Coming to America

The Kaabors arrived at their new home in Texas in October. Reem says it’s like a different world from what she was used to.

“The cities are clean, everything is beautiful, and we like that we are going to school,” she explains.

How many more refugees from Syria will settle in the U.S.? That question has been a big topic of debate in the past few months.

In September, President Barack

Obama announced that the U.S. will take in 10,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016. But then terrorists killed 130 people in Paris, France, on November 13. After the attacks, news reports suggested that one of the terrorists may have gotten to France by posing as a Syrian refugee. (French officials haven’t been able to confirm this, but they’re still investigating.) This has led to increased fears of terrorists sneaking into the U.S. by pretending to be refugees.

Within days of the attacks, 31 governors said they wouldn’t let Syrian refugees into their states. In recent **polls**, more than half of Americans said they don’t want the U.S. to accept more refugees from Syria.

President Obama, however, stands by his decision. “[We] can welcome refugees who are desperately seeking safety and ensure our own security,” he says. “We can and must do both.”

Despite the controversy, the Kaabors are determined to stay in the U.S. and become Americans. Reem hopes other Syrian refugees will one day escape the same struggles that her family has faced.

“I hope there will be no discrimination against anyone,” she says.

—by Joe Bubar

