



Longford Refugee Resettlement

Culture & Stories of Syria

Longford



March 2021

About Respond

Respond, an Approved Housing Body and service provider, has been working all around Ireland for 39 years. Our vision is that every family and individual in Ireland will have high-quality housing as part of a vibrant and caring community. Housing and decent accommodation, in the areas where people want to live, are central to improving people's lives and enhancing the health and well-being of society.

Approximately 10,378 tenants live in 4,520 homes across the 26 counties that we either own or manage; of these, there are 4,250 Respond social housing tenancies. Respond also have a range of services for families and individuals within our communities. We provide emergency accommodation with s24/7 support for families who are homeless in six Family Homeless Services, three Day Care Services for Older People, 17 Early Childhood Care and Education, Family Support and Refugee Resettlement services. Our aim is to provide person centred supports and services to support people to achieve their goals and reach their full potential.

Introduction

In response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, the Irish Refugee Protection Programme was established by the Department of Justice and Equality in 2015 and subsequently the Irish government committed to receiving 4,000 Syrian refugees to Ireland between 2016 and 2019. Respond are the implementing partners of the Refugee Resettlement Programme in counties Kilkenny, Longford, Laois and Wicklow.

The Refugee Resettlement Programme in Longford began in November 2018 with the first Syrian refugee family resettled on the 10th December 2018. Over the course of the twelve months that followed, a total of fourteen Syrian families were resettled in the county.

The role of the Resettlement Programme is to support the participation and integration of the families we work with into their communities and wider society ensuring independence and self-sufficiency. The Resettlement team identifies needs within the community and facilitates necessary training, awareness programmes or community meetings in order to ensure a successful resettlement.

Respond's involvement in the programme in Longford is coming to an end on the 16th March 2021. In light of the Covid-19 global pandemic, it was not possible to have a recognition event with the community but we hope that this booklet will raise awareness of refugee resettlement in Ireland, and in particular in Longford. We would like to thank you, the families, supported by the Resettlement team, who contributed to this booklet.

To the families we have worked with as they resettled in Longford, thank you for sharing with us your stories; it has been our privilege to be part of your lives during your resettlement journey and we wish you continued success in your new communities. A particular thank you to those, some of whom wished to remain anonymous, who shared their stories with us for this publication.

Respond are grateful to Longford County Council, the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for their ongoing support. I would like to personally thank the team in Longford, Lorna Lavery and Muhanad Jazmati supported by David Parslow, for all their work to make the programme a success.

To the people of Longford, we want to extend our thanks and appreciation for working with us to welcome Syrian families to your communities. We hope that through this booklet you gain an insight to the Syrian culture and develop an understanding of the journeys and challenges that many refugees face. And perhaps, most importantly, we hope that this booklet provides a reason for stories to be told, helping hands to be offered and friendships to be developed.



Warm regards,

**Louisa Carr,
Head of Services.**



A note from our Intercultural Worker

Muhanad Jazmati

From the moment I read the job title I got the feeling of “THAT’S IT”. The very idea of joining those two words together intrigued and excited me. I was very enthusiastic to start my new position as an Intercultural Worker.

To be an “Intercultural Worker”, to me, means something beyond the direct meaning of the role. It allows for the linking of two cultures together, like Irish and Syrian. It’s educating people, challenging peoples’ options, and attitudes, and perhaps most importantly, it’s being a sound board for people of both cultures, who need support, help and guidance.

At a quick glance, there are few similarities between the Irish and Syrian, but upon deeper exploration many uncanny resemblances begin to surface. Both countries have been through a very dark and difficult past, have faced huge challenges, and both of have a strong will to live and survive. The only difference is; Ireland has succeeded and Syria hasn’t, yet. But we have a great example to follow from the Irish, and to learn from. It shows that there is hope for Syria, and there will be a light at the end of the tunnel.



Covid-19, a global pandemic, has changed everything in our lives as we know it. It perhaps is a lesson as to how fragile our lifestyle really is. Although, many people in today’s world, especially those who have fled from war or other disasters didn’t need to be reminded of this lesson, unfortunately, this is something we have been reminded of many, many times before, yet it is important to remain positive, and strive for a brighter, better future. And from someone who has previously lived a life of crisis and uncertainty, my advice is to never lose hope. We will get there, it may just take time.

A note from our Resettlement Worker

Lorna Lavery

‘For Sama’ is a documentary that sees a 24 year old lady from Aleppo, filming the war in Syria on her camera phone. She reports the reality of the ruination of her home city in which no Western reporter could penetrate. Her husband was a Doctor so she had access to horrific scenes of hospital carnage which unfortunately was the reality of what was happening.

As I watched it, my heart crumbled. I thought of the 14 Syrian refugee families who I had spent the previous two years supporting to resettle in County Longford. And I thought of the people who didn’t have the opportunity to flee. And through the heartbreak, I began to feel humbled. I have been given the opportunity to get to know these families. To hear their stories. And to learn about their culture. But above all, I began to understand why the Syrian community in Longford, adapted without hesitation in abiding by the restrictions, and taking on board the guidelines as recommended by our government in light of the Covid-19 global pandemic. One Syrian lady explained to me, that there is great comfort in knowing that if we maintain social distancing, wash our hands, and don’t allow visitors to our home, we will be safe; life wasn’t always so reassuring.



And while resilience has offered some form of protection, needless to say, life during this global pandemic has not been without challenges for resettled Syrian refugees. For the first time in modern history, the Irish government implemented restrictions preventing people moving freely around their community. It is unfortunate that much of your resettlement took place during the pandemic preventing opportunities for social gatherings and events but thank you for your drive, desire and commitment for a successful resettlement. And so, for the first time ever, resettled refugees were supported to integrate to their communities while at the same time being asked to stay in their homes.

To the resettled Syrian families in Longford, always know that you have shown tremendous courage and strength on your resettlement journey. You should all be very proud. I wish you a happy, peaceful and content life in Ireland.

Angela's Ashes through the Eyes of a Syrian Refugee

Kinda Nassli

As a Syrian woman, starting a new life at the age of 47 in Ireland, a new country, culture, language, without the support of a network of friends or family, was difficult and challenging. Yet, this had been my dream since 2015 when still in Syria, and when all I wanted was to be a refugee; safe, in a European country like Ireland, where my three boys could thrive and live happily.



A few weeks after my arrival I discovered how empty and pale my life had become and how my eyes filled with sadness, shame and embarrassment when I represented myself as a refugee.

When I discovered Frank McCourt and his biography 'Angela's Ashes' everything changed. This Irish American writer, who himself was an immigrant, told a story that lightened my heart and taught me to understand more about Irish life and to appreciate the gifts of prosperity; I gained an understanding as to how the Irish suffered to regain these gifts after 8 centuries of dark, difficult times.

Why am I so touched? It was not the scenes of poverty, nor the death of children in the horror of Angela's Ashes, nor was it the Irish refugees fleeing from their beloved home so that they could find a means to feed their families.



Frank McCourt taught me not to be blocked by memories, not to be blinded by the sadness nor the happiness of the past. Through him, I found my own key to help me emerge in this new culture, where I now belong, with pride, and without shame.

I was moved because of the scene from my window when I finished watching Angela's Ashes – I looked at the modern, expensive cars parked in front of my neighbors' pristine houses and I wondered how Ireland healed, recovered its economy, spread the notion of tolerance, welcomed international investment, and replaced the stereotypical image of drunken men with one of hardworking and remarkable men and women? And in what appeared to me to be record time, these smiling Irish people were in a position to open their doors to warmly welcome refugees.

Then I remembered my beloved Damascus, where there are no more windows to look from, no more parked cars and no more neighbors.

Frank McCourt taught me not to be blocked by memories, not to be blinded by the sadness nor the happiness of the past. He taught me to be patient, to learn, and to learn more. Through him, I found my own key to help me emerge in this new culture, where I now belong, with pride, and without shame.

And history thought me about victims who became heroes, about sacrifices that changed the world and about refugees who became hosts.



A little bit about Syria



Pre-2011 / before the war

- Syria had a functioning society and a population of 22.8 million.
- Education and healthcare were free and heavily funded by the State.
- Tourism was flourishing .



It's People

- Importance is placed on family, education, respect, hospitality and self-discipline.
- Syria is a vibrant country with music, fashion and sport as popular hobbies.
- Traditional Syrian dance and music is often performed at social gatherings.
- There is a large urban / rural divide in Syria.



Family

- The family is the heart of social life in Syrian society:
- The father is generally the leader and provider for the family.
- The role of the mother is that of a care giver.
- Brothers have a responsibility to look after their sisters; and the responsibility of looking after aging parents falls to the brothers.
- Parents are addressed by the name of their oldest son i.e. Abu Yezan (the Father of Yezan), Um Yezan (the mother of Yezan).



Religion

- The majority of Syrian's are Muslim: They:
 - Do not drink alcohol.
 - Eat hal-al meat only.
 - Do not eat pork.
- Many choose to wear traditional Muslim clothing with the majority of Muslim women choosing to cover their head and chest, and sometimes their face when in the presence of any male outside their immediate family.

Personal Stories



A Lost Childhood

One day, when I was twelve years old I said goodbye to my parents and my two younger sisters. At the time, little did we think that it would be six years later before we would see each other again.

My home county had been in a state of civil war for the previous three years, and we knew we weren't safe. In many ways, similar to how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted Ireland (and much of the world), the economy had crashed, chaos was unfolding in our health services and many people were dying. The unfortunate, harsh reality was that we weren't safe, and there was nothing we could do to protect ourselves or our families. We needed to leave, it was our only hope of survival.

But leaving wasn't easy and we knew the journey ahead would be risky and difficult. Our aim was to leave Syria and be safe, but our goal was to reach Europe. My parents wanted the best for their children, and opportunities, like education and health care were best available in Europe.

There were countless discussions, debates and indeed tears before my family finally agreed on the journey that lay ahead of us. When ISIS entered our town, my father sold our family home to fund the trip that lay ahead of my fourteen year old brother and I.

And so, we hugged our family goodbye and embarked on a journey that would challenge us like no other. And that was it, my childhood was gone.

We faced many, many challenges – checkpoints, traffickers, prison, hunger and sheer exhaustion. It made sense for my brother and I to do it alone. And anyway, we didn't have the finances for all six of us to flee.

Europe was our goal, and the route that we planned with my parents before we left them was via Iraq, Turkey and Greece. Travelling from Iraq to Turkey was in ways the most challenging part of that journey. I missed my family terribly, and my heart ached. We crossed forests and mountains during the night so that we wouldn't be seen. To cross a border for any refugee is difficult, but my family are Kurdish, and because Turkey didn't have a good relationship with the Kurdish people we weren't welcome there.



It was because of the poor relationship between Turkey and Kurds that when we reached the Turkish border we had to enter a prison; it was a makeshift prison, once a basketball court. We weren't alone there, there was loads and loads of Kurds there too. We all slept together, used the same toilet, and there was no showering facilities.



To cross a border for any refugee is difficult, but my family are Kurdish, and because Turkey didn't have a good relationship with the Kurdish people we weren't welcome there.

Sixteen days into our confinement and we were taken to a house of a man who smuggled people to Greece. The next day, at midnight he took us to the water where we boarded a small boat. Again, we were not alone. The boat was over capacity, and there was easily 70 people on board. Off we went, in the dark, again. Our chances of survival were slim; the scene was exactly as you would see on television or on the internet – overcrowded boats, people shouting, crying and pushing. I feared for our lives, yet I never doubted that I would see my parents again. I held onto my brother tightly. And silence. The engine stopped. We screamed, we called for help and then we prayed. We knew we had to save our energy to keep warm. Our only hope was that someone would find us. An hour passed, and another, and in the distance we saw the Greek Emergency Services coming our way.



Again, we cried and we thanked God for answering our prayers.

The Greek people welcomed us and Greece became our home for two and a half years. We claimed asylum in Greece; a process in which you declare to the State that you don't have visa or appropriate paperwork to be there, but that you cannot return to your home country because you fear for your life. Life was good in Greece although we did not have access to work or education so we couldn't stay there long term. We went to the Irish Embassy and applied to be relocated to Ireland. Two years later our application was accepted.

In 2018, we were admitted to Ireland under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme; a programme that was established to support the resettlement of 4000 Syrian refugees

between 2015 and 2019. Initially, we lived in an Emergency Orientation and Reception Centre (EROC). This center is specifically for refugees and so there were lots of supports and services in place in preparation for our resettlement in the community; I started to learn English and learn about various Irish systems and the workings of them. I was then resettled to a town in rural Ireland where my brother and I live independently in the community, supported by a Resettlement Team. I began to enjoy life and we settled into Irish life quite well. For the first time in a very long time I had ambition and dreams. But overpowering all of that was heartache and sadness. I longed for my mother's hug. I needed my father to tell me that everything was ok. And I wanted so desperately to be a big sister to my two younger siblings.



For the first time in a very long time I had ambition and dreams. But overpowering all of that was heartache and sadness.

Meanwhile, the war continued to escalate, particularly in the Kurdish regions. My family were not safe. We kept in contact on our phones but due to the war there would be days and days in which they would not have access to electricity to charge their phones, or signal would be down. On those days I wondered if they were still alive.

I wrote a letter to the Irish Government requesting for support to be reunited with my parents. Permission to commence the Family Reunification Application process was granted on the basis that I was still legally

a child. It was a long and difficult process; the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic delayed the application significantly and there was mountains of paperwork that needed to be completed in English. The application was made all the more complex because I didn't hold my family's official documents. It was overwhelming but I couldn't give up – I needed my family. A DNA test confirming the biological relationship between my parents, sisters and I approved the application. My parents and sisters then needed to present at an Irish Embassy and unfortunately, the Embassy in Turkey was the nearest Embassy to them. I cannot explain the worry of knowing that my parents and sisters would need to cross the Turkish border, and endure many of the same challenges that my brother and I did years before. But they did it.

Once their Travel Documents were issued they booked a flight to Ireland and so, on the 18th December 2020, for the first time in six years my family were together. We hugged, and we cried, happy tears this time.



As Muslims, Christmas is not something my family would have traditionally celebrated. However since being resettled in Ireland we join our new neighbours and friends to celebrate this special time. We decorate our home, exchange gifts and enjoy nice meals together. I took a selfie of my sisters and I on Christmas Day and proudly posted it on social media, and I realised that Christmas 2020 was the first time I truly experienced what Christmas is really about – family, gratitude, sharing. Christmas will be forevermore an important and special celebration in our lives.

Now I am content. I feel like my life goals and ambitions are achievable. My past will at times haunt me, but it has shaped me into the person I am today. I have grown to be a kind, courageous, ambitious, brave and compassionate young lady.

And while I have first-hand experience of war and the devastation that it brings to families; as a twelve year old I said goodbye to my parents, knowing that I may never see them. I secretly wondered if my fourteen year old brother had what it took to keep me safe. I have been so hungry I've searched hedges and walkways for food. And my body has been so exhausted that I fell asleep praying that I would have the energy to wake up.

I also have first-hand experience of being made to feel welcome in a country thousands of miles away from familiarity and know the comfort and warmth that brings. I have relied on the kindness of strangers to start over again.



I want to say thank you. To my parents for having faith in me, and always wanting the best for me. To my brother who took me under his wing and looked after me from day one. I hope I have made you proud.

The Irish Government and the Irish Refugee Protection Programme, thank you for accepting our application, for bringing us to Ireland, and for approving the Family Reunification Application for our family.

To Respond and our Resettlement Team, for being such an important part of our journey. For encouraging us, believing in us and never letting us give up. Thank you.

And lastly, to the people of Ireland, for welcoming refugees, I will be forever grateful.

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Refugee Resettlement in Rural Ireland

My family were resettled in a small town in rural Ireland on a cold, wet, dark day in December 2018. Three years previously, we began our journey as we made the decision to flee from our homeland in the search of better opportunities for our family.

The arrival to our new home was in many ways, just another move. We had lived between tents, containers and hotels since we left Syria. It's difficult to explain how we felt – at last we were safe. Yet, there was feelings of lost, grief, loneliness and fear. Our youngest child was just two weeks old. We also had two primary school aged children and a toddler. We were all exhausted.

A knock to the door. It was some men to help us move in. They helped us with practical tasks – assembled the cot, made the beds and carried our luggage up the stairs.

The next day, the previous tenant of the house called by, just to show us the running of the house; simple things such as controlling the heating, how to turn off the water supply if there was a leak, and where

the fuse box was located. Little things that meant so much to a family who hadn't lived in a house for some years now.

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We had lived between tents, containers and hotels since we left Syria. It's difficult to explain how we felt – at last we were safe.

Our neighbours came to our house to welcome us, even though we couldn't speak much English. By now, many of the local people have drank some Arabic coffee and I have cooked some native Syrian food for people in our new community to taste.



The people in our new town made sure that Santa Clause knew where we lived, and for the first time ever, in December 2018, with four small children we celebrated Christmas. The kids loved it!

And so, over two years later we are very happy in our new community. We can speak good English now. I have met other mothers at the mother and toddler group and my husband has a job working as a caretaker in the local Family Resource Centre in the town. My 8-year-old daughter has learned the tin whistle, and when I cannot bring her to the class a kind lady collects her from our home and brings her to the class.

So despite the fact that we miss our families and friends very much, when we see our children happily playing with our neighbours in the neighbourhood it reassures us that we made the right decision to flee Syria.

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Syrian Life



I was born in a beautiful village in Southwest Syria in the province of Daraa; I lived with my parents and my 10 siblings. I had a very happy life here; we had lots of extended family living nearby and we had a good circle of friends. I have very happy memories from my childhood, and when I think about it now, I am sad that my own children will never have the opportunity to experience the true Syrian culture.

At the age of 18 I joined the military. I had no choice. Military service is mandatory for all young men who are not in full-time education. The majority of people from my area joined the military when they were 18, but some people who progress with their studies do not join until they graduate. The only exemption is if you are an only son or brother; in that case, your role is to look after and protect your family.

I left the military after two years when my mandatory service was up and started work as a painter and decorator. This gave me the opportunity to earn good money, and I gladly helped out other family members who weren't as well off. This too is an important aspect of the Syrian culture.

When I was 22 I married a very beautiful lady – we had many hopes, plans and dreams for our future together. But those

plans were quickly diminished when a civil war broke out in our country; our ultimate priority was survival, and chances of that were small if we were to remain in Daraa. Never in our wildest dreams did we ever think that war would happen in our beloved Syria.

Reluctantly, we fled to Lebanon and we spent eight hard years there. Those eight years were full of fear, anxiety and stress; often the Lebanese authorities ordered Syrian people out of their country because they didn't want us there. But, on a brighter note, while living in Lebanon, our daughter was born, and three years later my wife gave birth to a baby boy. The arrival of our children in many ways motivated us; we focused on a better life for them and we knew we would have to do everything we could to make sure they grew up in a safe world, with opportunities that would allow

them to thrive. Our resettlement to Ireland has thankfully provided us with the safety and security to once again hope and dream for our future.



The arrival of our children in many ways motivated us; we focused on a better life for them and we knew we would have to do everything we could to make sure they grew up in a safe world.

Flavours of Syria

Once known as the bread basket of the Middle East, Syria has a rich and ancient food culture. But sadly, due to the civil war, things have changed greatly; years of conflict in Syria has destroyed farms and cut off food supplies in Syria.

Syrian people continue to pride themselves on hospitality, and social gatherings centred on food is still very much a cherished aspect of their culture.

Many staple ingredients for Arabic dishes include the following: vine leaves, zucchini, bulgar, rice and olive oil. Herbs and spices such as parsley, mint, cumin and cinnamon are key store cupboard staples in most Arabic homes.

Here are two recipes of traditional Syrian cuisine with ingredients that are readily available in Ireland.



Hummus

Traditionally served on a large plate and usually served with Syrian bread (similar to pita bread), cucumber salad or falafel.

Serves: 3 people

Preparation time: 3 minutes

Utensils: mixing bowl & blender

Ingredients

200g tinned chickpeas or dried chickpeas that have been soaked and cooked
2 teaspoons of lemon juice
1 clove of garlic
100ml of water
50ml of tahini (sesame oil)
To garnish: paprika, cumin, chopped parsley and olive oil

Method

- Put the chickpeas, lemon juice, tahini, garlic, salt in a blender and blend.
- Add a little of the water to make a stiff paste.
- The amount of water you need will vary so add a little at a time.
- You can add a little lemon juice to taste.

Sahlab

A sweet milk beverage that is quick and easy to make. It has a creamy and fluffy texture and is served warm. Sahlab is available in most coffee shops in the Middle East.

Serves: 4 people

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Utensils: saucepan & whisk

Ingredients

1 litre milk
1 tablespoon sahlab or 3 tablespoons corn-starch
100g sugar
1 tablespoon rose water
Cinnamon, as a garnish on top

Method

- Place the milk in a saucepan and add the corn starch and sugar.
- Stir well then bring to a simmer, keep stirring until thickened.
- Add the rose water and stir to mix.
- Transfer to cups and sprinkle with cinnamon.
- Serve with crackers.



Refugee Resettlement:

The Facts

More than 11 million people have been displaced or killed since the war in Syria commenced in 2011; it is estimated that 5.5 million people have fled their homeland seeking refuge. In response to this humanitarian crisis, the Irish Refugee Protection Programme was established by the Department of Justice and Equality in 2015 and subsequently the Irish government committed to receiving 4,000 Syrian refugees to Ireland between 2016 and 2019. Respond are the implementing partners of the refugee resettlement programmes in counties Kilkenny, Longford, Laois and Wicklow.

1



Resettlement is when programme refugees move to a country that has invited them to live there.

2



Programme refugees have a right to reside in their resettlement country permanently.

3



Ireland committed to inviting 4,000 programme refugees to Ireland between 2015 and 2019.

4



Programme refugees arrive in Ireland with their refugee status already confirmed.

5



As programme refugees are invited to Ireland, they do not enter Direct Provision.

6



The number of programme refugees resettle in each county depends on the county population.

“

Thank you for sharing your video and I am so happy to see your smiling faces”

“

Welcome to Longford! I wish you a full and happy future”

“

Thank you for reminding us that we can be hopeful throughout this Covid-19 pandemic. We all have things to be thankful for.”

“

I am very glad that you felt welcomed into our country and I hope that stays forever. I am very happy that you are happy and content in Ireland. I know it must be hard missing your home but I hope within time you come to love Ireland more and more. You have also opened my eyes to see how lucky I am so thank you for that.”

“

Welcome to Ireland. Everyone here is equal and you can feel safe and welcomed here. We hope you have a great time and feel included in all the activities.”

“

I hope you get to return to your country to see friends and family one day. Until then you are a part of our community and we want you to feel at home.”



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