

## Fresh start stories

Leaving behind years of a comfortable life in their country, Syrian refugees face a harsh reality in Brazil. There's a lack of jobs and money, but they are thankful for being away from the war.

**Isaura Daniel\***

São Paulo – Up until 2011, they were well established in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and in other Syrian cities. They had jobs, their own homes, some assets, the kids in good schools, friends, a family that would gather in festive and religious dates. But the war changed this reality for the Syrians and pushed millions of them into a much harsher reality in other parts of the world, including Brazil.

Becoming refugees meant a radical change in their daily lives and in the standards of living for the majority of Syrians that arrived in Brazil. For most that came, it meant living in the suburbs of the cities, giving up their professions, going through financial difficulties and depending on aid to live and eat. They feel and suffer the differences, but show themselves pleased to be alive and confident that the asylum option assured their survival.

These are people such as Abdulbaset Jarour, who relies on help to live in São Paulo, and refugee Razan Suliman, who is holding a crowdfunding campaign to be able to have a roof to shelter her family and cook snacks to sell. Syrian Tamadar Faher Aldeen had a comfortable life in her country, with her husband working in the maritime transportation sector, but in Brazil she already spent months without being able to make rent. The husband got a job not long ago. "Here we don't have anything, but thank God, we are alright," says the woman.

Unlike the Syrian immigrants that arrived in Brazil at the end of the 19th century and found a country with many opportunities, especially in the retail sector, the new Syrians are facing a nation in an economic crisis and high unemployment rates. The country, however, presented itself as the only one with open doors. Since 2013, Brazil is issuing special humanitarian visas



to them in consulates in Syria's neighboring countries.

Last year, 326 Syrian received asylum status in Brazil. The immigration experts say they arrive with a different profile from most of the other refugees. Normally, they are middle-class, already went to universities, have professional experience and speak two or more languages. "They have an above-average professional and educational profile, above the average of refugees and also of the Brazilian population," says the senior aide of public information of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Miguel Pachioni.

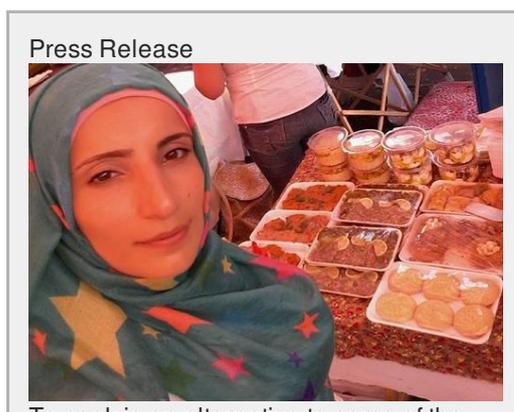
The price of airline tickets is already an indication that the Syrians that are able to travel to Brazil come from a more favorable economic condition, since the air tickets are expensive. Some sell everything they got to buy them, some arrive with some money. "Initially, they are not extremely vulnerable, but nothing's preventing them from reaching a vulnerability status," says Pachioni.

The stories heard by ANBA show that the money brought along is not enough to last long. Mayra do Prado, a volunteer at NGO Compassiva, who works with the Syrian refugees, says that they arrive sparing money even for meals. Marília Calegari Quinaglia, sociologist and anthropologist, who is working on a doctorate degree on Syrian refugees at the Campinas State University (UNICAMP), says that many of them sold their houses, cars and companies to leave the country. "They arrived already without the same financial position," she says.

The Syrian don't like to rely on help or social security programs. "They make a great effort so they can rely on their own as quickly as possible," says Pachini, of UNHCR. Marília says that they accept help, but tell that they rather work to support their families. However, at the same time, it's rare that any one of them will find a job in their expertise area. Mayra says that the majority of Syrian refugees she knows went to the university, even hold post-graduate and MBA degrees, and are from sectors such as engineering, pharmaceutical, education. Despite this, most of the doors leading to jobs are closed to them.

Mayra believes that three factors take them out of the labor market: lack of fluency in Portuguese, the difficulties to revalidate their diplomas and earn professional certification, plus the prejudice. Pachini says that Brazilian companies are not prepared to welcome them and that this rejection includes the language, lack of information by the companies and xenophobia, prejudice due to the different religion and habits. To revalidate their diplomas, they need to take a Portuguese test, something difficult to someone that just had their first contact with the language.

The work that they normally get is in Arab restaurants or electronics stores of Syrian and Lebanese owners that arrived in older immigration flows, says Marília. The path for many of them is that of entrepreneurship, especially in gastronomy and electronics or apparel retail. "They are entrepreneurs," says Pachioni, who sees in this an important contribution to Brazil. "If we look to Brazil, with the economic stagnation, the potential they have to contribute, in innovation, is amazing," says the UNHCR representative.



To find a way for livelihood has been one of the main challenges to this new Syrian population in Brazil, who stepped out of the plane without knowing where they would spend the night. Some were able to get help from other Arabs at the airports areas, others were guided to search for help in aid organizations, others looked for the mosques. Those who could afford it went to cheap hotels. Marília says that some spent hours, even days in the airport. “But they have a strong group, the Arab community. The Arab community in São Paulo helped a lot,” says Marília, recalling that today the refugees themselves help out those still arriving.

The non-governmental organizations also play an important role in aid to Syrian refugees and from other origins in Brazil. Some are able to help right when they are arriving, some offer Portuguese courses and fairs for them to sell their products in. For instance, the NGO Compassiva, in which Mayra works, offers Portuguese classes, entrepreneurship courses, helps translate their resumes and with integrate into the labor market, promotes events for the refugees, donates basic goods, provides social and legal assistance for the revalidation of diplomas. It helps many Syrian refugees.

### **Within family**

The newly-arrived Syrians bring along their religion – for most, Islamism – and also their prevailing way of living: family life. Few come alone. Some men arrive beforehand and find a place to stay with a relative, and then they bring their wives and kids. “They come with their families and continue to expand their families here,” says Pachioni. According to the UNHCR aide, they are proud to say their kids are Brazilians.

In her doctorate thesis, Marília Calegari Quinaglia surveyed the reality of Syrian children and the ones born here in Brazil. Marília says that most of the children go to public schools that don't have the infrastructure to deal with them. The language is a barrier, plus the cultural issues, such as the way the teenagers dress, with the hijab, and the physical contact with their peers. But the scholar says that, in the families, the first to master the language are the children, due to school.

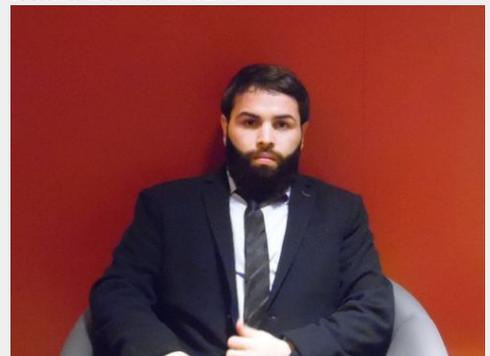
The anthropologist believes that Brazilian society has plenty to gain with the cultural diversity brought by the Syrian refugees. She highlights their resilience and strength to restart. “It's touching,” says Marília. In this scenario, Pachioni underscores the importance of Brazilian to accept those unfamiliar to them as a human being and holders of their rights, with knowledge and expertise. According to him, without this element from outside, without the viewpoint brought from other places, we remain stagnant.

### **A young Syrian**

The young Abdulbaset Jarour, 27 years old, is one of the Syrians looking for a fresh start for his life in Brazil. Living in São Paulo for three years already and without a formal job this entire time, the refugee is living for free, for the last year, at the home of a Brazilian woman. The refugee is very thankful to this woman and those who helped him up until now, but he never gets tired to say that all he wants is the opportunity to work.

Jarour comes from Aleppo and was born in a family of

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contractors. He started a major in Management and, despite his age, already has done a little of everything in his country: he sold electronics, textile, food products, vehicles, had his own stores and went to the army. Hurt by shrapnel and seeing his friends die, he realized it was time to leave. Jarour spent some time in Lebanon, was able to collect some money that people owed him and then travelled to Brazil.

Jarour: an entrepreneur in Syria

Unsuccessfully trying to find a job, Jarour realized one year ago that he was without any money already. "I thought to myself: what I'm going to do? I felt like I had no one to rely on," he says. But a friend made the contact with the Brazilian that opened her doors to him.

The Syrian says that he already sent out over 150 copies of his resume. Despite the dismay, he says he won't quit. He took entrepreneurship courses, gives lectures – most of them as a volunteer – telling what it is like to be a refugee, founded a NGO for refugees to help each other out and formed a band. But none of this is able to support him. As soon as he gets an income, Jarour plans to bring her mother and teenage sister from Syria. Jarour's father died and the rest of the family is spread out in Turkey, Iraq, Germany, Canada and Lebanon.

### A roof uncertain

In the city of Santo André, Syrian Tamador Faher Aldeen and her husband are managing to support, in any way they can, their three sons. At the time of the interview to ANBA, Tamador's husband had gotten a job a month ago and the house where they lived had rent due. The family came from the Syrian city of Latakia and spent some time in Egypt before seeking asylum in Brazil. Tamador says that in Syria they had a home, two cars, and that her husband had a job. "We wish to have the same life we had in Syria," she says.

Without being able to get a job in retail, his expertise area, Tamador's husband looked for one in restaurants. He worked for three months in a restaurant but the place closed and he was unemployed for a long time. In Brazil, Tamador has had help. "Brazilians help a lot, the mosques also," she says, who relies on her oldest ten-year-old son to speak Portuguese.

### Some help to cook

Another Syrian, Razan Suliman found in Arab food a way of guaranteeing some money to support her family in Brazil. The husband has gone deaf and has other medical issues due to the bombs of the war. In Syria, Razan was a school teacher for kids and her husband was a tinsmith, but both realized that their lives were in danger after they were held by a terrorist group. It was then that they left the country.

In Brazil, she started to sell food to close friends and then opened a website to expand. Despite finding a way professionally, the couple, who have a small son, is still facing financial difficulties. Currently,

Personal Archive



Tamador and her husband: renewed life in Brazil

Personal Archive



Razan and her husband: Arab cuisine

Razan is holding a crowdfunding campaign to buy food products to keep cooking to order and to pay rent. The family is currently living in a house owned by a mosque but soon will have to leave and they don't have the means to afford a new home. The crowdfunding campaign is hosted at the website Vakinha (<https://www.vakinha.com.br/vaquinha/ajuda-para-razan>).

### **Will there be a return?**

Despite the difficulties faced in Brazil, the Syrian refugees don't see the return home as a solution and don't even know if they will return in case the war comes to an end. The United Nations made public that 600,000 Syrians returned to their homes this year, but in the same period 800,000 left. Tamador says that their kids, who came when they were little to Brazil, don't want to return. One of them was born here in Brazil. "I'm not coming back, now it's difficult, our house was destroyed by the war, we don't have anything over there anymore," says the Syrian.

The same question about the return is asked to the refugees by those working with them or studying the migration issue. The answers are diverse. Pachioni, from UNHCR, says that four years ago he felt the Syrians wanted to return, but that right now that's not the case anymore. "They look at their home country and don't recognize it anymore. This makes them more comfortable in Brazil", he says, pointing out that the feeling is different for those who left relatives behind.

Marília says that the Syrian refugees dream about the return, but are uncertain if they will be able to, and don't know how long the war will last. She explains that returning would mean starting over again, and now they already have friends here in Brazil. Mayra feels they are happy in Brazil because they are far away from the war and had a chance to survive. Some tell her that Brazil is their new home, other say they will return tomorrow if the war is over. "Not because they don't like Brazil, but because Syria is their homeland."

**\*Translated by Sérgio Kakitani**

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