

U.S.

In Michigan, Syrian Refugees Cling to a Longtime Haven

By **JULIE BOSMAN** NOV. 23, 2015

BLOOMFIELD HILLS, Mich. — In late 2011, as killings, kidnappings and sectarian strife crept across its battle-scarred city of Homs, Syria, the family of four made a sorrowful decision: to flee.

Radwan Mughrbel; his wife, Sanaa Hammadeh; and their two young sons packed their bags with only a single change of clothes per person. They took a bus to Damascus and hired a taxi to spirit them across the border into Jordan. For years, they patched together a meager life, barely making enough money to eat and desperately seeking refugee status.

When the United Nations refugee agency asked where they wanted to go, the answer was obvious.

“America,” said Mr. Mughrbel, a short, wiry Muslim man of 52, his face lighting up in a smile as he sat in his bare-walled living room in this Detroit suburb last week. “They brought us here, and I feel safe, like nothing bad can happen to us. Now we have a beautiful life.”

Yet that beautiful life has been shaken. Since the terrorist attacks in Paris, a tide of anti-refugee, anti-Muslim sentiment has swept, angrily and inexorably, across the United States. Now Mr. Mughrbel and Ms. Hammadeh

say Michigan is not as welcoming a place as it was before.

Gov. Rick Snyder, who in September publicly rhapsodized about the boon that refugees were to Michigan's economy, was among the first of more than two dozen Republican governors to vow last week that they would try to keep displaced Syrians out of their states to preserve the safety of Americans from would-be terrorists.

Presidential candidates and elected officials around the country have suggested closing mosques, collecting Syrian refugees already in the country or creating a registry for Muslims.

Sentiments like those are especially jarring in Michigan, which has one of the largest and most vibrant Arab-American populations in the country and a vocal group of advocates for bringing more Syrian refugees to the United States. In the Detroit suburbs, refugees have traded a harrowing war in the Middle East for cold winters, strip malls and neatly arranged subdivisions, with houses as uniform as Monopoly pieces.

The United States has accepted more than 1,800 Syrian refugees since October 2014. Michigan has welcomed close to 200 — more than any other state except California and Texas. The Obama administration has said it wants to bring in at least 10,000 in the next year.

Those plans have been threatened by the sudden and contentious debate over whether these refugees, many of them young children, are security threats. On Thursday, the Republican-led House voted overwhelmingly to impose new screening procedures on refugees from Syria. After Gov. Mike Pence of Indiana, a Republican, said he did not want any more Syrian refugees in his state, one Syrian family destined for Indianapolis was rerouted to Connecticut.

In explaining Mr. Snyder's opposition to Syrians coming to Michigan, his spokesman, David Murray, said the state remained "unwavering" in its

commitment to helping refugees.

“But our first priority is to keep Michiganders safe,” Mr. Murray said. “After tragedies such as we’ve seen in France, Lebanon and in the skies above Egypt in recent weeks, it’s proper to pause and review background and safety procedures with our partners in the federal government.”

Regardless, advocates for refugees say they have no intention to stop helping them settle here. Many more Syrian families who have waited for refugee status for years are destined for Michigan in the coming months.

Mr. Mughrbel, who arrived with his family in July, bristled at the suggestion that refugees like him could be a threat.

“We didn’t cross illegally,” he said. He threw his hands in the air. “We went through hell to get here.”

Escape From War

That hell started in Homs more than four years ago.

The government, under President Bashar al-Assad, had cracked down on the rebellious city, religious sects were at war with one another, and the deadly mix of bombings, snipers and random violence forced many residents indoors. Ms. Hammadeh was afraid to leave their home to shop for fresh food. On some days, the family resorted to eating moldy bread.

The couple’s sons, Soubei and Ahmad, now 19 and 18, were then in their early teens, and their parents began to fear they would be kidnapped.

“We got scared,” Ms. Hammadeh said. “The government would see kids on the street and take them, beat them. We didn’t want them to kidnap our children.”

In November 2011, they resolved to leave.

Everything had to be left behind: furniture, photos, nearly all of their clothes. The only exception was Ms. Hammadeh's gold wedding band and two bracelets that she slipped onto her wrist. Once the family arrived in Jordan, she sold them all for about \$230.

Life in their temporary country was expensive and difficult. Mr. Mughrbel's brother, who had also fled to Jordan, died of a heart attack. Mr. Mughrbel blamed stress.

After months of grueling trips to the United Nations refugee agency in Amman for repeated hourslong interviews as part of the refugee process, they found out they had been granted asylum.

"Our life was about to change," Mr. Mughrbel said in Arabic through a translator. "We were going to have a safe future for our kids, live a happy life, be in a better environment, be treated like a real person."

Before departing for the United States, he and his family attended four days of orientation, where they were instructed in the ways of American life. How to drive a car. How to throw banana peels and other trash in a garbage can, not on the ground.

They were also schooled in what they should focus on when they arrived. Learn English, they were told. Find a job, because America is all about work. The United States is a wonderful place, they were told. People will respect you there.

On their first morning in their new Michigan apartment, they marveled at the lawns and trees. "We didn't walk around because we were afraid we would get lost," Mr. Mughrbel said. "So we just looked out the window."

"When I saw all the grass," said Ms. Hammadeh, 43, her large eyes widening, "I felt that I was reborn."

She sheepishly recounted trivial missteps. A used minivan, bought for

\$2,500, was accidentally filled with premium gas. An unfamiliar shampoo seemed to make her hair go temporarily thin.

But after four months, the family says it is financially independent, living on the earnings of the two sons, who work in a factory. Mr. Mughrbel, a cook and butcher in his native Syria, has found occasional work in a restaurant and, once his English is better, would like to open one of his own. Sometimes the family piles into the van after dinner at home and visits other Syrian families for coffee and gossip.

At home last week, family members bustled around as a soccer game played on the television, their preferred alternative to CNN and all its bleak bulletins. The smell of eggplant and spices wafted from the galley kitchen. A glance through the sliding patio doors revealed other modest but well-kept brick apartment buildings nearby.

They have kept their lives small, mostly going to work and back, and occasionally to the mosque. Mr. Mughrbel condemned the attacks in Paris. “These are criminals,” he said. “We are against this kind of stuff. You can’t just walk and kill somebody in the street. God won’t forgive you.”

Familiar Support

The task of keeping an eye on the new refugees has fallen to many of the 3,000 Syrian-Americans who have settled near Detroit for generations, a group known for its prosperity and devotion to higher education.

“There’s a significant number of Syrians here, so if the refugees don’t have relatives, they’ll at least have a lot of cultural connections,” said Dawud Walid, the executive director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “Our community in general has been very welcoming to refugees, irrespective to their national origin.”

Many established Syrians have formed volunteer organizations to assist in

the resettlement process; supplied the refugees with furniture, clothing and food; and procured apartments, often at a discounted rent.

“We’re trying to help them find their way once they are here,” said Mahmoud Altattan, 65, the owner of Altas Greenfield Market, an emporium of produce, jarred olives, nuts and pita breads in Southfield, a Detroit suburb. “They have some difficulty adjusting at first. We try to put them on the right path.”

New refugees have come to his store in search of familiar comforts: pumpkin seeds, sweets and coffees from their native country. Mr. Altattan, who arrived in the United States from Syria 27 years ago and speaks softly accented English, said he advised the refugees that their most important task was to learn the language.

“Most of the Syrian community is educated people, doctors, lawyers,” said Mr. Altattan, who proudly noted that he counts a doctor and lawyer among his four grown children. “The new Syrians who are coming now are not so educated.”

Refugee resettlement officials say many of the new refugees have worked in blue-collar jobs in Syria, as carpenters, cooks, tailors and drivers. Many were poor and vulnerable when they fled.

Case managers for the agencies that assist with resettlement spend the first few months of refugees’ time in the United States in a sort of hand-holding: making nearly daily visits to their homes, helping them book doctor’s appointments and register their children for school, and driving them to the grocery store.

“When refugees arrive to the country, they don’t know what to do,” said Jewan Poulis, a program coordinator with Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, an agency that has received about one or two Syrian families each week since June. “They have no clue what’s going on.”

Amer Sharaf, a 36-year-old Syrian refugee who arrived in Michigan in August, said he and his family had been warmly embraced by the older Syrians, who helped them by donating furniture and translating bills. A house painter when he lived in Syria, he found a job here in an automotive factory, making \$9 an hour and working 50 hours a week.

But in his family's apartment last week, as he and his wife, Marvat Mando, sipped Turkish coffee and watched their children read e-books on iPads provided by their public school, he turned to a new and troubling subject: the terrorist attacks in Paris and the governor's subsequent criticism of Syrian refugees.

"It's wrong," Mr. Sharaf said. "Why is what happened everybody's fault?"

Another Arrival

Last Tuesday afternoon, refugee specialists were gathered in a conference room at the suburban Detroit offices of Lutheran Social Services, discussing their final preparations for the arrival of a family of Syrian refugees on Wednesday evening.

Hani Aziz, a refugee specialist who is an Iraqi refugee himself, was assigned to pick up the family of three at 8 p.m., at the end of a long journey flying from Jordan to Frankfurt to Chicago and, finally, to Detroit.

Two days earlier, Mr. Snyder had proclaimed his opposition to new Syrian refugees entering the state. The specialists mentioned his name defiantly.

"If Snyder's at the airport tomorrow, pushing them back onto the plane, then we know he's for real," Sean de Four, the vice president of children and family services at the agency, said wryly.

But when Wednesday evening came, the family's flight was delayed for almost four hours. Standing in the arrivals terminal beneath an enormous

Christmas wreath, Mr. Aziz scanned the crowds nervously, not knowing anything about the family except for names.

Finally, just after midnight, the family emerged, looking remarkably unruffled: Nayef Buteh, 45; his wife, Feryal Jabur, 41; and their 8-year-old son, Arab.

Ms. Jabur was poised and elegant but sank onto a bench near the baggage claim.

“It was very tiring,” she said through a translator, looking glassy-eyed and exhausted. The couple’s son, wearing a black bomber jacket and jeans, slumped wordlessly next to her and lowered his dark eyelashes.

Mr. Buteh was polite but agitated, his eyes darting toward the exit. It had been 10 hours since his last cigarette. He stepped out into the mild November air and lit up.

“Thank God,” he said in Arabic, taking a deep drag.

Worn down by the grinding war in Syria, the family fled in March 2013 on the bed of a pickup, destined for a refugee camp in Jordan. But water was scarce there, and medical care was poor. Arab kept getting sick. The three sneaked out illegally, heading to a larger city and finding an apartment with relatives.

Close to two years later, the family was granted refugee status. “They said, ‘We’ll send you to Michigan,’” Mr. Buteh said as the minivan driven by Mr. Aziz hurtled down the nearly empty highway. “They told us it’s very beautiful, with a large Middle Eastern community and jobs in car factories.”

About 2 a.m., the van delivered the family to its small motel, where a spread of tea, chicken, rice, apples and pickles awaited on a night stand.

Mr. Buteh stepped out into the deserted parking lot and rapidly smoked

another cigarette. He patted the beige, puffy coat he was wearing and glanced upward.

“I was not expecting it to be warm,” he said. “I came here expecting snow.”

© 2015 The New York Times Company