

Rolling Stone

A Syrian Refugee Responds to Donald Trump

In the U.S. just 16 months and he already understands the meaning of our country better than the sitting president of the United States



Syrian refugees bound for the United States in Jordan last April. Muhammad Hamed/Reuters

By Mark Binelli
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Of all Donald Trump's executive orders this week, the most repellant — the most grotesquely un-American — has been his ban on the

entry of all refugees into the United States. The order is set to last for 120 days, except for Syrian refugees, who are barred from entering the country indefinitely; immigration from seven majority-Muslim countries has also been suspended for 90 days. As Oxfam president Raymond Offenheiser has noted, "The refugees impacted by today's decision are among the world's most vulnerable people — women, children, and men — who are simply trying to find a safe place to live after fleeing unfathomable violence and loss."

While in Michigan recently, [reporting on how voters in my home county responded to Trump's economic message](#), I drove out to a suburban apartment complex to meet up with Nedal, a 30-year-old Syrian Muslim who'd come to Michigan in June 2015 as a refugee — the very month, it happens, that Trump launched his presidential campaign. (Nedal asked me not to use his last name, for fear of the safety of family members who remain in Syria.)

Detroit and its suburbs is home to a large and historic Middle Eastern population, both Christian and Muslim — Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqis — as well as sizable group of Muslims from Bangladesh and Bosnia, and Michigan has accepted the second-highest number of Syrian refugees in the United States, after California. "Here in Michigan, you've seen first-hand the problems caused by the refugee program," Trump told his supporters at a campaign rally at Freedom Hill, a park in Sterling Heights, Michigan, not far from where I grew up. The claim was false, for there had been no problems, and in fact Michigan had been losing population for much of the past decade and needed new residents. (The state lost a congressional seat in 2000 and will likely lose a second in 2020.) No matter: Trump darkly warned of "large numbers of poorly vetted refugees coming into your state without your knowledge, support or approval."

Nedal grew up in Daraa, the southern city where the first Arab Spring-inspired protests against the dictatorship of President Bashar al-Assad erupted. "The people watched Egypt, and we have hope, you

know?" Nedal, who participated in the protests, told me, speaking in broken English.

Before the civil war, Nedal had studied agricultural engineering at university, where he took a particular interest in beekeeping; he's part of the third generation of a family of farmers. As the violence escalated, Nedal and his wife and infant daughter fled on foot across the border to Jordan. There, he told me, "Every month I say, 'Okay, this [will be the] last month. Maybe next month head back to Syria... Okay, next month. Next month.' I'm very tired. No study, no work. It was very difficult." Three years passed. Nedal went to the United Nations and applied for refugee status, hoping to land in Europe, where he had friends and family members who'd also escaped the war. But after performing a series of background checks, officials informed him that his family would be going to the United States instead — specifically, to Michigan. Nedal, unfamiliar with the state, Googled "Detroit" and thought, "Oh no!" A friend who'd visited New York told him, "Detroit? You have big problems, Detroit more than Syria!"

On the flight over, Nedal and his wife both wept. They'd had a second child in Jordan, and now they found themselves en route to a distant country where they knew no one. But with help from a Lutheran nonprofit group called Samaritas, they've managed to settle in. Nedal has a job at a factory that makes signs for car washes and gas stations and he and his wife are both taking ESL classes. An extrovert, he remains frustrated by the pace of his learning, but he'll practice English on strangers at the local Kroger's and other parents at the playground whenever he gets the chance. His "big dream," he said, is to resume his study of bees at Michigan State University, which has a strong agriculture program, and eventually become a professor. "I have many ideas for bees," Nedal told me.

Life still isn't easy. Nedal misses his parents, who remain trapped in Syria, though Daraa seems safer now. More recently, his seventeen-year-old cousin was captured and murdered by ISIS. The family only learned of the fate of the cousin, who'd been missing for months, via

the Internet, on a website where ISIS posts images of killings. On his phone, Nedal showed me a posed photograph of his cousin that could have been from an American high school yearbook. Then he flipped to the next one: the cousin in an orange jumpsuit, kneeling in the desert, a masked man pointing an assault rifle at him. Then the next: the cousin's corpse, bloody and sprawled on the ground.

When I brought up Trump, Nedal became animated, as if he wanted to get a number of things off his chest: "See, listen to me! This is a good question. And important. When he [first] start talking about Muslims or Syrians, I'm afraid. But after that, I think a lot about it. I see that Trump never bad as Bashar Assad. He never kill me. And he never kill my kids. He talking. Okay. This is not my problem. The people need him. After four years, we can look about. Maybe he make the United States more up. I don't know. He's a businessman, and he's smart. Maybe now we'll get good job for everybody. Just, I would like the people, before you say Muslims or Syrians no good, just look to [each individual.] If you see him no good, okay. He's not good. But me, no same as my brother. And my brother, no same as me. When I live in Jordan or Syria, all the young people look to United States, you know? See many groups live together, not have any problem: Muslim, Jews, Christians, Hindus. All together. We say, 'Why my country not be the same as the United States?'

"But now? If the United States have same Syrian problem? This is a problem."

Many people have written about "through the looking glass" moments in our recent political history, and for me, this has been one of them: the vertiginous realization that a refugee who has been here for sixteen months understands the meaning of our country better than the sitting president of the United States.