

# What you need to know about the new Nova Scotians from Syria

- The Syrians who come to Canada have a wide diversity of experiences and backgrounds – and this information sheet provides a generalized perspective. Each Syrian is different and what may be true for one, is not necessarily true for all.
- They have come to your community because they had to flee the war in their country that has been going on since 2011
- Living conditions for them as refugees were poor. The majority were in urban centers or makeshift dwellings and they may have not had access to good shelter, clean water, health care, schools or ways to gain an income.
- There are now over 4 million Syrians refugees and Canada committed to bringing 25,000 to live here (sponsored by the government and by community groups).
- It is estimated that 1,500 Syrians will come to live here as new Nova Scotians.
- There is already a small community of people from Syria who have lived in Nova Scotia since before the refugee crisis. Many came as immigrants and students.

## Languages

- Arabic is the official language spoken by all Syrians. They may also speak a variety of other languages.
- New Nova Scotians from Syria may speak some French and English. Others may be in the process of learning the language.

## Literacy/Education

- Many arrived with a range of educational backgrounds. Some were professionals (doctors, dentists, etc), others have worked as general labourers or farmers.
- There was an 84% literacy level in Syria prior to the conflict.

## Religion

- Syrians coming to Canada have a variety of religious faiths. The majority are Muslim, but there are also Christians and other religious faiths as well.
- Devout Muslims pray five times a day, and there is Friday (Juma) prayer that happens weekly, and two Eid prayers which are annual.
- Syrian Muslims may fast during the lunar month of Ramadan, during which eating, drinking and smoking is not allowed from sunrise to sunset. At the end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate Eid by feasting with family.
- Devout Christians may wear crosses around their necks and attend church regularly.

## Food and Dietary Restrictions

- Syrian food consists of grains, meat, fruits and vegetables. Common dishes include pita and hummus (chickpea dip), baba ganoush (eggplant spread), mahshe (stuffed grape leaves, zucchini and bell peppers), shawarma (gyro), and salads such as tabouleh and fattoush.

- Syrian Muslims may not eat pork, and some will not consume alcohol or eat shellfish.
- Muslims may avoid foods that use pork and alcohol such as Gelatin in gummy bears or things cooked with wine sauce or Saki. Some people only consume "Halal" meat which is similar to Kosher food.

### Families

- The majority of Syrians come from families made up of parents and children. Families also include grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. It is not uncommon for these larger extended families to live all together in a single house or apartment. In general, the family is under the authority of the oldest man.

### Gender Roles

- In Syria, women were able to seek employment and receive the same education as men.
- In Islam, women are not viewed as inferior.
- For some Syrians, men and women may socialize separately except on occasions when the whole family is involved.
- Shaking hands or hugging between different genders is not common.

### Dress

- Many Syrians in Canada will wear clothes like you (jeans, dresses, shirts, etc).
- Some Syrian women wear the hijab (head scarf) or niqab (face covering), others do not. It is based on individual choice, family tradition as well as religious background.

### Communication

- In social situations, people may stand close together, speak loudly while moving their hands and heads.
- Syrians are very affectionate people though they may do this according to gender. Men may walk together, linking arms or holding hands, and they may hug and kiss. And women may do the same with other women. Close physical contact in public is more common between men with other men, or women with other women, than it is between girlfriend and boyfriend or husband and wife.
- Greetings hold great social importance, are lengthy and include questions about health. They usually are accompanied by a handshake (if it is between the same gender) and sometimes by a hug and a kiss on each cheek. Placing the right hand on the heart when meeting someone is a sign of affection.

### Arts & Culture

- Syria is known as one of the Cradles of Civilization and has a rich history of arts and culture.
- There is a tradition of storytelling that goes back thousands of years.
- Arabic music is tied to the storytelling tradition and often used to tell tales of love, honor, and family.

### Resources

- [www.culturalorientation.net/learning/backgrounders](http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/backgrounders)
- [rods.sk.ca/userdata/files/76/EN%20Syrian%20Population%20Profile.pdf](http://rods.sk.ca/userdata/files/76/EN%20Syrian%20Population%20Profile.pdf)