

Family fleeing Syria finds haven in New England

by [Elodie Reed](#) in the [January 6, 2016](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) For a man whose store was blown up and who has fled falling artillery shells, life in the United States now offers a new challenge: the political rhetoric of an election year.

Zaid Alnasar and his family were the first Syrian refugees to settle in Westfield, Massachusetts. Their apartment is nestled on a city street, with white sheer curtains and laundry pinned up on the porch. Aside from the baby born this year, their lives are unremarkably routine. But for the Alnasars, this may be the most remarkable thing of all.

“We reached a safe haven,” Alnasar said, recalling his first thought upon arrival in the United States.

President Obama has called for the United States to accept 10,000 of the estimated 4 million Syrian refugees over this fiscal year, which began October 1. Gov. Charlie Baker of Massachusetts was among 31 U.S. governors saying he wanted to halt acceptance of more refugees until he was sure that the vetting process is thorough enough.

A November 2015 U.S. House Homeland Security Committee report said that, according to preliminary findings in an investigation begun in December 2014, it’s difficult to find background information on Syrian refugees given limited intelligence there.

Since the Alnasars arrived, several other Syrian families have come to Westfield. According to the Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants, 32 refugees have been resettled in the state between 2011—when Syria’s civil war began—and 2014.

On a recent afternoon, the members of the Alnasar family, ranging from three months to 35 years in age, sit on two couches and folding chairs in a clean, sparse living room.

Zenab Alnasar serves thick, rich coffee and orange and mango juice. Mohammed, age eight, and Hadi, age ten, play Corvette on their PlayStation. Through the door, a blackboard with a quote from the Qur'an is visible. Malam, age 13, sits in her room using her laptop, translating Arabic to English. Her computer displays a question: "What would you like to become someday?" Malam replies with a smile, "Doctor."

Aside from the schools and city health department, the Alnasars have few interactions with their neighbors, sticking mostly to workers at the resettlement agency, Westfield Ascentria, and fellow Syrian refugees.

Prior to the Syrian conflict, the Alnasars lived in the southwestern province of Daraa (former population 244,000). Zenab raised the children while Zaid drove a taxi and ran a cellphone shop with his brother.

"I had a house, I had a car—as a family we were very happy," he said. "The revolution started, and we lost all that."

In May 2013, two missiles were fired near Alnasar's store, destroying the shop and throwing Zaid six or seven yards.

Zaid escaped serious injury and tried to help children who had been playing nearby. Three were dead, but he thought a fourth might still be alive.

"I went to pick him up and . . . his head was dislocated from his body," Zaid said. "That immediate moment, I decided: 6 a.m. the next morning, I'm leaving. The next time, it's going to hit me and my wife and my kids."

In November 2014, the family arrived at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, each with one bag in hand. An Arabic-speaking team met them from Ascentria Care Alliance, a New England-based organization designated by the State Department as a refugee resettlement agency. The two-member team, which speaks the families' native language, transports them from the airport to their new apartment, which is prescreened and set up with utilities, furniture, and several days' worth of food.

The first few days for a family are often overwhelming, said Mohammed Najeeb, resettlement coordinator for Westfield Ascentria, whether refugees are fleeing civil war or not. Najeeb, who is a naturalized citizen from Iraq, personally greets each family.

Najeeb also asks families what their most pressing needs are. For the Alnasars, it was getting medical care for their son Hadi, who has a long-standing liver condition. Over the past year, Hadi's health has improved and is expected to continue doing so.

It is one of many things that have improved, the Alnasars said.

When they lived in Egypt for 18 months while waiting to obtain refugee status, they feared for their safety outside of the house, and the children dreaded school.

"In Egypt we used to love holidays," said eight-year-old Mohammed, recalling breaks from classes. "Here, we hate holidays."

The family attends a mosque in Springfield and is able to maintain a halal diet. When Zenab gave birth to Salih, her wishes were respected at the hospital when she requested female attendants during examinations and childbirth.

"They had no problem providing at all," she said.

Zaid has found a temporary job at the Lightlife Foods factory, which specializes in vegetarian food. Working four or five days a week, he is able to pay most of the family's monthly housing costs, with some help from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance.

As with all resettled refugee families, the Alnasars also received help from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, which provides medical services and cash for up to eight months after arrival.

Zaid said his family has benefited from the generosity of others. In the grocery store, fellow customers help him find specific products, and when he first began using the bus, the driver took the time to show him how to use the correct money to pay his fare.

"I find help everywhere I go," he said.

There are some local people who have concerns about the arrival of Syrian refugees. John Velis, the state representative for the Westfield district, said he supports the governor's position.

"Our foremost priority needs to be safety," he said.

Velis said that he wasn't aware that Syrian refugees lived in Westfield until recently, but he wants to support them in the long run.

"It's obviously a balancing act," he said. "It's just tightening up the security procedures [and] after that, of course, welcoming them with open arms. At the end of the day, most human beings want what we want."

The Alnasars still face remnants of the difficulties they fled. Whenever planes go by overhead, Zenab still raises her arms to shield herself.

"She still has that fear in her," Zaid said. "I tell her, 'We're in America. Don't be scared.'"

Supporting families like the Alnasars also comes with challenges for a community, said Kelly Gauger, deputy director of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Affordable housing can be difficult to find, as are entry-level jobs for those who don't speak English well, she said.

Syrian refugees will be sent to areas of the United States with the resources to help them, she added.

"We're really going to be spreading them out," Gauger said. "I don't think it's going to overwhelm the system."

For his part, Zaid Alnasar said that even if their home country were to find peace, he wouldn't move his family back.

"My vision of America was, life is beautiful there," he said. "And I was right."

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