

Like a human being

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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On the way in to work one day, I listened to a [radio interview](#) with Anas Al Abdullah, a Syrian refugee who had recently arrived in Toronto. It was wonderful to hear about what the experience had been like for him during his first week in Canada. It was heartbreaking to hear about what he had endured. It was moving to hear about the longing he felt for family members who will be arriving in Canada shortly. It was inspiring to hear about the sponsorship group in Toronto and the ways in which they had prepared for Anas's arrival and how they had walked with him during his first days in this strange new land.

And it was impossible to hear Anas's story without thinking of our own situation here in Lethbridge, Alberta—without looking ahead, imagining, dreaming, hoping. Since February, our local group has been collecting funds, raising awareness, and preparing for the arrival of families from Syria. But refugee sponsorship is no seamless uncomplicated process. There have been stops and starts and hiccups and detours along the way. Processes that I (naively, no doubt) think should take days or weeks have taken months. Information about specifics is thin on the ground. Government regulations and protocols seem to keep shifting and changing shape. As soon as I feel like I understand something or have some concrete idea about timelines, something changes. I keep being asked, wherever I go in the city, "When are the Syrian families coming?" And I keep saying, "I don't know. Soon. Hopefully. I just don't know."

At times, it can be frustrating. We all want to be part of good and hopeful stories, but sometimes it feels like there is this un-traversable mountain of bureaucracy and red tape, this labyrinth of impenetrable paperwork standing between our little group and this good story that we're waiting for. And if it feels this way for those of us on *this side* who are waiting to provide a welcome, I can't even *imagine* how it must feel for the Syrian families who are waiting to come, families who have experienced so much hardship, so much loss, so much waiting.

One of the things that stood out to me in the radio interview I mentioned earlier, was when Anas was asked, *What does it feel like, here in Canada?* He responded, “They treat me like a human. They treated me as a brother or as one of their children. They didn’t make me feel different.”

Like a human.

It’s so easy to think about the Syrian refugee crisis in terms of numbers: 11 million displaced people; 3 million in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon; 6.5 million internally displaced people in Syria; 800,000 in Germany; 25,000 coming to Canada; 3000 in Alberta; 200–300 in Lethbridge; \$35,000–40,000 to sponsor a family for one year. Numbers, numbers, numbers.

It can sound like a cliché to say that behind each number is a real human being with a real human story, but it’s a desperately necessary truth to keep rehearsing. Numbers aren’t *unimportant*. They allow us to categorize and place boundaries and demarcate to get *some* sense of the scope of what we’re facing. And this is good. But it’s all too easy to reduce people to numbers, to allow faces and names and futures and pasts to be buried in generic checklists of of meticulously itemized human misery.

I have had a picture on my desk for the last half-year or so. It is a picture of nine human beings—the nine people that we continue to hope and pray will soon find their way to Lethbridge. Two men in their mid-thirties. Two women in their late twenties. A mother in her fifties. Four bright-eyed beautiful kids, three, four, seven, nine. Nine human lives that have been disrupted, disoriented, overturned by violence and chaos and suffering. Nine human lives that have undoubtedly known loss and heartache. Nine precious children of God who have spent years being pushed and pulled across borders and through offices and embassies and interviews and phone calls, nine people wondering, *Where will we go? When will we be safe? Who will help us? When will we have a home?*

I look at these nine faces every time I sit down at my desk. Often, I say a quick prayer. For their safety, for a speedy arrival, for peace and stability. For patience. And, perhaps most of all, for a world in which we develop the capacity to see beyond numbers and sensationalistic headlines and fear and threats and social media hysteria and politicking and even the selfishness and pride that can so easily insert itself into our own efforts to do good, and see one another for what we are. *Human*

beings in search of better stories to be a part of.

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