

Buoyed by election, Canadians roll out welcome to Syrian refugees

by [Michael Holtz](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Bayan Khatib's earliest memories of Canada are mostly fragments of her daily struggles as a seven-year-old Syrian. There was the language she couldn't speak and the food she couldn't stand, namely pizza and ketchup.

Yet Khatib, who's now in her mid-thirties, also remembers the generosity of a local church in Calgary that helped her family resettle there. The church found them a place to live and even stocked their refrigerator before they arrived. It's the kind of compassion Khatib hopes to emulate as she prepares to help welcome the latest wave of Syrians to her adopted country.

"Once upon a time it was my family," she said. "That's why I feel so drawn to help with the refugee crisis today."

As the crisis deepens, many Canadians are eager to re-establish their image as one of the most welcoming and inclusive nations in the world. In 1986, the year Khatib and her family arrived, the United Nations High Commission for Refugee presented the Nansen Award for Contributions to Refugee Aid to the people of Canada—the only country to have received the prestigious prize—in recognition of "their essential and constant contribution to the cause of refugees."

But Canada's status faded over the past nine years, under Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper. His opponents accused him of being cold-hearted at best and Islamophobic at worst for his immigration policies, which prioritized skilled workers and professionals over refugees.

Justin Trudeau, who defeated Harper in Monday's election, appears determined to show the world a different face. He has vowed to take in 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of the year.

Naomi Alboim, a professor at Queen's University in Kingston, formerly headed the federal government's refugee resettlement program.

"We need a government that can rise to the occasion, to respond not only to the incredible need abroad but to the demands of its citizens," Alboim said. "Canadians desperately want to help."

A compassionate Canada

Public outcry over the Syrian refugee crisis reached a boiling point last month in the midst of Canada's federal election. The catalyst was the image of a three-year-old boy whose body washed up on a Turkish beach as his family fled Syria after a failed attempt to immigrate to Canada.

"It's sad that it took that image and that a little boy had to die for people to care," Khatib said. "As a Syrian activist, I feel almost terrified that I'm not going to make enough use of this momentum."

Canada has long been recognized as a world leader in international humanitarianism largely thanks to its refugee sponsorship system, which empowers private groups to resettle refugees on their own. In past times of crisis, the country resettled refugees quickly and in large numbers given its population, now 35 million. Canada took in 60,000 Vietnamese in just 18 months between 1979 and 1980. It did the same with thousands of refugees from Kosovo in the 1990s.

"We did it before and we can do it again," said François Crépeau, the UN's special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants and a law professor at McGill University in Montreal. "It's not a matter of resources; it's a matter of political will."

The Harper government had promised in January to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees over three years, but aid groups and potential sponsors repeatedly complained about its lack of urgency. Only 1,074 Syrian refugees had been admitted as of early September—and only 188 of them were government-assisted.

Lifeline Syria

Frustrated by the slow pace, private sponsorship groups from Vancouver to Halifax have stepped up their efforts to meet the growing need of Syrian refugees. In June, more than two dozen prominent Torontonians started a campaign to bring 1,000 Syrian refugees to the metropolitan area within two years. They named it Lifeline

Syria, an homage to a similar effort called Operation Lifeline that was launched in 1979 to help the Vietnamese refugees. The organization's mission is to recruit potential sponsors and help them to support refugees' resettlement in Canada.

Alexandra Kotyk, Lifeline Syria's project manager and sole full-time employee, is constantly on the move. If she's not on the phone or responding to emails, she's likely at a meeting or delivering a presentation around Toronto. Last weekend was her first full weekend off since early September.

The past few weeks have been especially hectic for Kotyk. The image of Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler whose body washed ashore in Turkey, triggered an outpouring of interest in private refugee sponsorship. In the 48 hours that followed the image's release, Lifeline Syria received more than 1,400 e-mails, which caused its web server to crash.

"People were interested before, but I saw a five-time increase at least, if not more, after the photo," Kotyk said while sitting in a conference room across the hall from Lifeline Syria's sparsely furnished office in Toronto's Little Italy. "I just hope that the goodwill continues."

The first refugees coming through Lifeline Syria, a family of eight, are scheduled to arrive in Toronto in two to six weeks. Khatib has volunteered to greet them at the airport and introduce them to their new home. She's intent on paying it forward after making the same journey herself three decades ago. She plans to stock their refrigerator and show them to the nearest Middle Eastern grocery store.

But more than anything, she said, "I want to tell them what a wonderful place I think Canada is."