

LEAVING SYRIA:

Refugee Stories

case study | population dynamics unit

Over 65 million people around the world have been forced to leave their homes because of conflict, persecution, or violence. That means that in 2015, one out of every 113 people on the planet was displaced, a population equal to that of California and Texas combined. Over 40 million of these people are still living within their own countries. Another 21 million are **refugees**, having crossed national borders to escape a dangerous situation. Half of them are children.

Not since the aftermath of World War II has the world seen such refugee flows. In just the year 2015, 12.4 million people were newly displaced. Sixty percent of the people fleeing internationally came from just five countries: Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Syria. Each of them has a story.

Here we have a snapshot of a few of the 5 million people who have fled their home country of Syria because of the conflict that began in 2011. They are escaping bombings, violence, and chemical weapons that have torn up their country as a civil war deteriorated into a much broader conflict, where terrorist groups have taken advantage of chaos and a power vacuum, and regional instability has grown.¹

Faaez and Shaza al Sharaa²

Husband and wife Faaez and Shaza al Sharaa lived in Daraa, the city in southern Syria where in March 2011, pro-democracy protestors calling for the resignation of autocratic President Bashar al-Assad were shot. This event sparked protests and violence across the country and morphed into what the BBC calls a “war within a war.” Faaez and Shaza held on for two years while violence erupted around them. One day in 2013, Syrian soldiers on a manhunt stopped Faaez on his walk to his job at a healthcare company and held him and several other civilians at gunpoint, calling them terrorists. An old woman intervened, running toward the men and pleading for mercy for “her son, her nephew, her neighbors.” He had never seen her before.



A close-up view of the Za'atari camp in Jordan for Syrian refugees as seen on July 18, 2013, from a helicopter carrying U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh.

Faaez was lucky to find passage out of the country the very next day. Smugglers took him and Shaza across the border into Jordan to the Za'atari refugee camp. The United Nations and the Jordanian government set up Za'atari in 2012 as a temporary site, but as the Syrian conflict deepened, refugees streamed in faster than they could be resettled. The camp's population grew to 80,000 people, becoming Jordan's fourth largest “city.” With limited prospects, refugees there have started some 3,000 small businesses, including bakeries, a garden shop, barber shops, a supermarket, and even a bridal gown rental store.

As recounted in *Time*, Faaez and Shaza were luckier than most of the refugees who have been stuck for years in the three-square-mile desert site; Shaza's family was able to get them smuggled into Amman, where they waited for official U.N. resettlement. They were hoping to get to Sweden, which at the time had some of the best benefits for refugees, but Sweden tightened its borders (and after accepting 160,000 **asylum-seekers** in 2015 has since tightened them further). Finland was the next possibility, but that didn't work out either.

After multiple rounds of screenings, the International Organization for Migration assigned the couple and their new baby to the United States. Their first trip on an airplane was to Dallas, Texas, toward a new country and a new life. Their baggage contained the wedding photos, clothes, and few other small keepsakes that they had carried the day they fled home. They now are learning English. Faaez got a job working nights in a Walmart, and Shaza is home with their two small children, the second one a U.S. citizen.

Olympic swimmer, Yusra Mardini³



Yusra Mardini trains in Berlin for the Olympics in Rio.

Yusra Mardini hates open water. About two years before she had the chance to compete in the 100-meter butterfly and 100-meter freestyle competitions at the 2016 summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Mardini found herself swimming for 3.5 hours in the dark waters of the Aegean Sea, pulling a dinghy built for six that had been crammed with 20 people. The group was fleeing the Syrian conflict, headed from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos. Just 20 minutes into their journey, the engine died and the boat began to take in water. Yusra, her sister, and two young men were the only ones on board who knew how to swim. All four jumped overboard to help, but only the two girls were strong enough to complete the swim that got the group to safety.

Yusra was 13 years old in 2011 when the Syrian war began. It took a while before she could fully grasp the enormity of the war that was tearing up her home city of Damascus. Just like any other teenager, she loved to text and chat with friends, and would get frustrated when school was cancelled or she couldn't go out to socialize. She trained in a pool beneath a gaping roof blown apart by bombings. Two of her fellow swimmers were killed. In 2012, a massacre that left hundreds of civilians dead destroyed her family home. After all that, Yusra's mother gave her permission to leave if she could find someone to take her safely. The two sisters fled with two of their father's cousins.

After the swim to Greece, they passed through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria, before reaching Germany. The sisters now live in Berlin. Their parents and two other sisters were able to join them in temporary asylum.

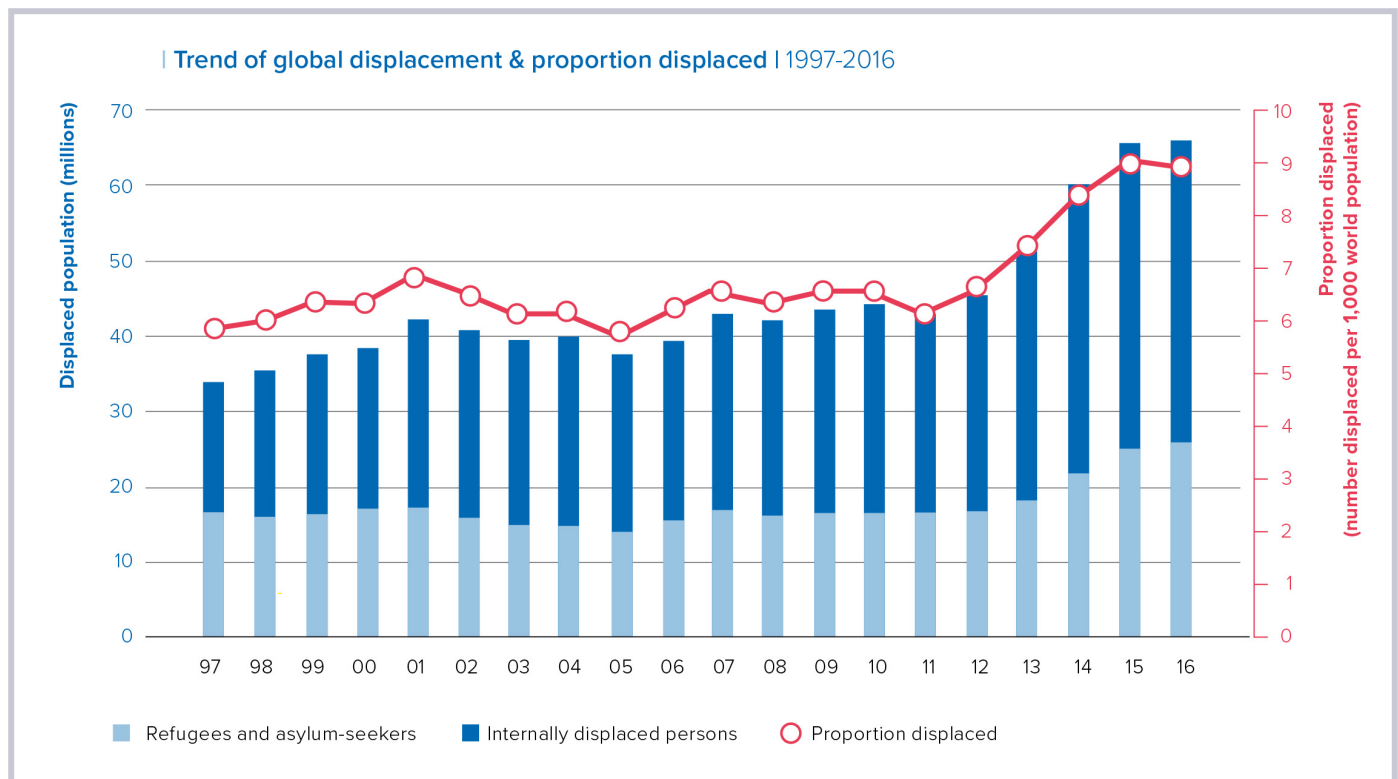
While Yusra didn't win a medal, her role in the first Olympic team of refugees, which included athletes originally from Syria, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ethiopia, helped bring global attention to the plight of the displaced.

Love on the run⁴

“Our love is stronger than this country that is blocking the border.” That is what Tarek conveyed to the *This American Life* reporters covering his *Romeo and Juliet*-like tale, which may have found a happier ending.

Tarek was walking up the beach after a swim on the Greek island he had escaped Syria to when he first spotted Hadil. Struck by her beauty, he relentlessly pursued her affections, even as their group of refugees moved from the island to Athens, from camp to camp northward in hopes of crossing the border to the rest of Europe. She was Christian, her eyes set on Germany, no time for love. He was a Muslim who wrote poetry and couldn't help be swept away.

Their feelings for each other deepened in the cramped refugee camps as the Grecian gateway to Europe became increasingly narrow as other countries put limits on accepting refugees. Greece is the poorest country in Western Europe; even before the Syrian influx, one out of every four workers was unemployed. The Greek civil servants working to find the refugees temporary housing in stadiums, highway rest stops, a former hospital, and a closed airport, have had their own salaries slashed in half in national austerity measures trying to keep the economy afloat. Somehow Tarek and Hadil made it through family dissent, smugglers' arrests, beatings, and divergent escape attempts. They got married, having both a Muslim wedding and a Christian wedding. The relationship official, they won Hadil's reluctant family's acceptance.



The photo that woke the world

These are some of the lucky ones. They've lost their homes, but they are alive. As of 2017, the conflict has uprooted half the country's 22 million people. Many of those who have not left the country are taking refuge from violence in Syria's rural areas. They may have moved multiple times, and face food insecurity and water shortages. Upwards of 250,000 have been killed.

One who died as a result of the war was Alan Kurdi, a three year old boy who drowned in September 2015 on his family's journey to Greece. The photo of his body washed ashore on a Turkish beach swept the world, inspiring donations and calls for governments to open their doors to more asylum seekers. But the outpouring was short-lived. Overall humanitarian assistance and resettlement options are falling short of the need. As of late 2017, it is unclear when Syria will be stable enough for the refugees to have the chance to go back home.⁵

More Syrian refugee stories can be found at these sites:

<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php>

<http://www.businessinsider.com/syrian-refugee-stories-told-by-humans-of-new-york-2015-12/#amman-jordan-5>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/syrian-refugees/story/refuge/>

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¹ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2015. Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2015. UNHCR Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/576408cd7/unhcr-global-trends-2015.html>.

^{2,5} Altman, A. (2015). A Syrian Refugee Story. Inside one family's two-year odyssey from Daraa to Dallas. *TIME*; UHCR. (2016). Syria Regional Refugee Response. Retrieved from <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176®ion=77&country=107>; Guttman, A. (2016). World's largest Syrian refugee camp has developed its own economy. *PBS Newshour*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/worlds-largest-syrian-refugee-camp-has-developed-its-own-economy/>; Bilefsky, D. (2016). Sweden Toughens Rules for Refugees Seeking Asylum. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/22/world/europe/sweden-immigrant-restrictions.html>; BBC (2016). Syria: The story of the conflict. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>

³ Saul, H. (2016). Yusra Mardini: Olympic Syrian refugee who swam for three hours in sea to push sinking boat carrying 20 to safety. *Independent*, Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/yusra-mardini-rio-2016-olympics-womens-swimming-the-syrian-refugee-competing-in-the-olympics-who-a7173546.html>; Wilder, C. (2016). She Swam to Escape Syria. Now She'll Swim in Rio. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/02/sports/olympics/a-swimmer-goes-from-syria-to-rio-from-refugee-to-olympian.html>

⁴ This American Life. (2016) Are We There Yet? Transcript. Episode 592. Retrieved from, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/592/transcript>; This American Life. (2016). Don't Have to Live Like a Refugee. Episode 593. Retrieved from, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/593/dont-have-to-live-like-a-refugee>