

Syrian
Refugee
Resettlement
in Canada

A NATIONAL PROJECT



Leah K. Hamilton
Luisa Veronis
Margaret Walton-Roberts

EDITED BY

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, over 5.6 million people have fled Syria and another 6.6 million remain internally displaced. By January 2017, a total of 40,081 Syrians had sought refuge across Canada in the largest resettlement event the country has experienced since the Indochina refugee crisis.

Breaking new ground in an effort to understand and learn from the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative that Canada launched in 2015, *A National Project* examines the experiences of refugees, receiving communities, and a range of stakeholders who were involved in their resettlement, including sponsors, service providers, and various local and municipal agencies. The contributors, who represent a wide spectrum of disciplines, include many of Canada's leading immigration scholars and others who worked directly with refugees. Considering the policy behind the program and the geographic and demographic factors affecting it, chapters document mobilization efforts, ethical concerns, integration challenges, and varying responses to resettling Syrian refugees from coast to coast. Articulating key lessons to be learned from Canada's program, this book provides promising strategies for future events of this kind.

Showcasing innovative practices and initiatives, *A National Project* captures a diverse range of experiences surrounding Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada.

"*A National Project* gives equal weight to the experiences of the refugees and the experiences of the receiving communities, sponsors, and institutions, setting it apart from previous studies of Canada resettlement operations. This timely book breaks new ground by involving scholars from coast to coast in an effort to understand and extract the lessons from the Syrian program."

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AND MARGARET WALTON-ROBERTS

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Private Sponsorship of Syrian Refugees: Perspectives of Sponsors and Refugees in Quebec

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Yannick Boucher, and Caroline Lester*

INTRODUCTION

Quebeckers show their solidarity in various ways to people experiencing distressing situations. One of these ways is to engage in sponsoring refugees and people in similar situations living abroad.

(MIDI 2014, 1; our translation)

Because of its consequences, of a scope unrivalled since the Second World War, the Syrian conflict has shed light on the complexity of refugee realities. Historically, Quebec has been committed to welcoming a certain number of refugees via the Canada-Quebec Accord on Immigration (MIDI 2013). Indeed, each year Quebec resettles refugees under the UNHCR Resettlement Program, while, since 1997, the province assumed responsibility for the Private Sponsorship Program on its territory (MIDI 2014). The visibility of the Syrian conflict gave significant impetus to the Private Sponsorship Program. Between 2015 and 2017, the province received 11,251 Syrian refugees – 9,064 privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) and 2,187 Quebec government-assisted refugees (GARs) – of whom the majority (81%) were admitted via the Private Sponsorship Program (MIDI 2017b). In the rest of Canada, the proportion of PSRs was just 36% (IRCC 2017). This can be explained by the political inclination of the province as well as by the

historical presence of Syrian immigrants in Quebec: the largest percentage of people in Canada of Syrian origin live in Quebec – 44% of the nation's total, almost 18,000 individuals – of whom 40% live in Montreal (IRCC 2015). This impetus in favour of private sponsorship illustrates an important surge of solidarity toward refugees (McCallum 2016). Sponsors take charge of them for a twelve-month period, providing financial support, care, housing and settlement support. Such sponsors may be organizations – community or faith organizations – or “groups of two to five persons” as defined by Quebec's immigration ministry, the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration (MIFI; or MIDI, up until October 2019) (Comité de Suivi 2016). This program has often been cited as a model throughout the world (Garnier et al. 2018).

The magnitude of this resettlement wave leads us to ask: What are the experiences of privately sponsored Syrian refugees? Given what has been deemed a “massive” influx, the issue of sponsors' responsibilities for the integration of the refugees is centrally important. How do sponsors interpret their responsibilities toward the refugees they welcome, and what are the types of support they provide to them? In order to answer these questions, our team met with more than fifty participants, including sponsored refugees, sponsors, stakeholders, and community collaborators. The results of this action research, carried out between 2016 and 2017, reveal significant heterogeneity in sponsorship experiences, sometimes positive, sometimes ambiguous.

The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate the diversity of Syrian refugee sponsorship experiences from the viewpoints of the sponsoring organizations, the sponsors, and the refugees. In order to achieve this, our research team – consisting of community workers and scholars in anthropology and social work – relied on an action research framework and adopted an interpretative and critical perspective. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the specificity of the Refugee Sponsorship program, its potential positive effects (complementarity with Quebec's government-assisted refugees program, a “multi-solidarity” system, social support, etc.) and its limitations (overprotective or negligent sponsors, lack of support for sponsors, blurred responsibilities, and decentralization of the state). These findings will be of interest to scholars in migration, refugee, and settlement studies as well as to policy makers, practitioners working in the settlement sector, and other stakeholders. After a description of our research questions and methodology, the analysis is divid-