

RESILIENCE IN SEEKING REFUGE: RELIGIOUS COPING STRATEGIES IN MUSLIM  
REFUGEES FROM SYRIA

by

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## ABSTRACT

Resilience in Seeking Refuge: Religious Coping Strategies in Muslim Refugees from Syria

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The recent shift of attention onto Syrian refugees has resulted in much media coverage and discussion regarding this population. This study delved into the religious coping strategies of Muslim refugees from Syria. Participants were derived through a DFW-based nonprofit organization. Questions asked of participants were including but not limited to resiliency and religious coping mechanisms. Major themes developed from this study included: religious ideologies, challenges as new religious minorities in the United States, resettlement issues, and benefits of resettlement. Results showed high correlation in all participants between resilience and religious beliefs.

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## Resilience in Seeking Refuge: Religious Coping Strategies in Muslim Refugees from Syria

### **Introduction**

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [or herself] of the protection of that country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.a.)” By the middle of 2015, the number of refugees worldwide peaked in over 20 years to about 15.1 million (UNHCR, n.d.a.). In 2014, Texas accepted the highest number of refugees in the United States at 7,214 (United States Department of Health and Human Services), and that number is expected to rise in 2015 and in subsequent years. Texas houses the most refugees in the United States (U.S. State Department of Refugee Resettlement). In four months, 2,016 refugees were housed in Texas from October 2015 to February 2016 (U.S. State Department of Refugee Resettlement). Of these 2,016 refugees, the breakdown of ethnic groups was as follows: 36.3% of refugees were from Burma, 23.3% from Iraq, 11.7% were from the Democratic Republic of Congo, 7.2% were from Somalia, 5.1% were from Iran, 3.4% were from Syria, 3.0% were from Bhutan, 2.5% were from Afghanistan, 2.2% were from Eritrea, 1.0% were from Burundi, 0.5% were from Sudan, 0.5% were from Cuba, 0.4% were from Ethiopia, and 2.1% were from other countries (U.S. Department of Refugee Resettlement, 2016).

Refugee resettlement in the United States has been in existence for approximately 100 years (History of Refugee Resettlement in America, 2016), yet has not received much public attention. Refugees are chosen as the topic of interest, and the purpose of study in this paper is

due to the recent influx and shifting of attention onto this population. Several events and social media responses occurred in the past year in regard to refugees, resilience, and the scope of refugees' traumatic experiences. Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian toddler whose lifeless body was photographed face-down on a Turkish beach while he and his mother were fleeing to safety while trying to cross the Mediterranean, spawned social media outrage when the image was taken and published in 2015 (Gatehouse). Likewise, an image of a four-year-old Syrian child, Hudea, swarmed the internet with heartache and desolation. The photograph displays a young child with a frown on her face and arms in the air. The cameraman stated that the child believed the camera was a gun and then put her arms up in surrender (Drury, 2015). Ahmed Al-Jumaili, a 36-year-old Iraqi refugee man who was residing in Dallas, Texas, was shot and killed while watching the first snowfall of his life (Hallman, 2015). Jumaili had recently arrived to the United States from Iraq, only to have his life ended abruptly and unexpectedly.

#### Refugees from Syria

The Syrian refugee crisis is the worst refugee crisis since World War II (Norton, 2015). In 2014, an estimated 3,300 Syrian refugees were entering neighboring countries on a daily basis (Zetter & Ruedel, 2014). Syrian refugees have needs and concerns which often cannot be met by host countries or other entities who are in charge of their care (Achieme, 2015, p. 689).

Approximately four million Syrian refugees have fled from the country in order to escape persecution and injustices (UNHCR, n.d.b). With 75% of the refugees being women and children (UNHCR, n.d.c.), the vulnerability of this refugee population is concerning (Achieme, 2015, p. 689). Syrian refugees are often deprived of the very basic necessities of life needed for survival, such as: water, shelter, sanitation and hygiene, education, and health (UNHCR, 2013).

Despite the magnitude of the Syrian refugee crisis, however, there has been a lack of response to the emergency situation in Syria which has devastated the country since 2011 (Achiume. 2015, p. 695). Of all Syrian refugees resettled in the United States from October 2010 to October 2015, most are of predominantly Arab ethnicities, with the remainder being Kurdish and some other ethnic groups (Nowrasteh, 2015). They are overwhelmingly young, with slightly less than half being under the age of 14 (Nowrasteh, 2015). Ninety-six percent of them are Muslim of any denomination, with the rest being Christian, nonreligious, or of other faiths (Nowrasteh, 2015).

#### Purpose

The purpose of the present study is to examine the role of religion in the lives of Muslim refugees who have recently resettled to the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex. In particular, the focus will be on the lived experiences of Muslim refugees from Syria to understand how religion may contribute to resiliency in these populations.

### **Literature Review**

#### Overview

In order to provide a framework to guide the present study, a summary of the relevant research will be provided in the form of a literature review. Major topics covered will include: mental health of resettled refugees, a needs assessment of refugees, and Muslim refugees in the United States.

#### Mental Health and Related Concerns of Resettled Refugees

Refugees undergo a multitude of traumatic experiences throughout their journeys, such as illness, rape, family tensions, and unsafe conditions (Green, 2013). Survivors of torture are very

likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or symptoms of anxiety (Hooberman, Rosenfeld, Ramussen, & Keller, 2010). In addition to mental health stressors, there are several other components to traumatic occurrences in the lives of refugees. Employment opportunities in a new country may be very different than the potentially elite positions many refugees once held in their home countries; not all refugees have held high positions in their native countries, however.

In a literature review of Bosnian Muslim refugees, authors (Snyder, May, Zulcic, & Gabbard, 2005) found that this vulnerable population went through numerous struggles such as: genocide, rape of both women and children, destruction of places of worship (mosques), expulsion from homes, and intentional humiliation. The effects of these traumatic experiences greatly influenced the lives of children as well. Children may develop post-traumatic stress disorder, display poor school performance, or show symptoms of depressive disorders (Snyder, May, Zulcic, & Gabbard, 2005).

Authors of the same study further illustrated some of the refugees' numerous other struggles. As opposed to immigrants who may leave their countries for a better life, refugees leave their homes in order to survive (Snyder, May, Zulcic, & Gabbard, 2005). Refugees often have severe hardships during transit to their new destinations, in addition to culture shock, adjustment problems with language and disturbances within themselves, their communities, and their family dynamics (Lipson, 1993; Worthington, 2001). Losses of family members or friends either deceased or not *en route* with them, isolation from social phenomena, dislocation from their home environments, and death of children cause an unresolving grief in the lives of this population (Snyder, May, Zulcic, & Gabbard, 2005).

Refugees may at times be prone to believing social stigmas and notions surrounding racism, which could definitely affect their resiliency. In a study involving Pakistani and Somali refugees, participants claimed that they would fall into the bottom of the social hierarchy due to being “terrorists” and “dark-skinned” (Thomas, Roberts, Luitel, Upadhaya, and Tol, 2011).

#### Needs Assessment

Some of the needs refugees encounter include, but are not limited to: community support, disillusionment, lack of financial resources, lack of job opportunities, health care concerns, language barriers, violence, and education (Mitschke, Mitschke, Slater, & Teboh, 2011).

Additionally, Honneth’s theory on love, solidarity, and rights (Honneth, 1995) greatly assisted researchers (Thomas, Roberts, Luitel, Upadhaya, and Tol, 2011) in visualizing the needs of refugee populations in a study completed on Nepalese refugees and their strengths and struggles. Some of the findings were that refugees were greatly in need of close relations, emotional support, and religion; these three as a combination greatly served as abstract objects refugees were in need of throughout their struggles (Thomas, Roberts, Luitel, Upadhaya, and Tol, 2011).

#### Muslim Refugees

Islam is a monotheistic faith that is based on the holy book, the Quran. Muslims follow the word of one God in addition to the teachings of the final prophet, Mohammad. There are approximately 1.6 billion Muslims across the globe, 23% of the world’s population, which makes Islam the world’s second-largest growing religion (Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012). The Asia-Pacific region consists of the most Muslims, at 62%, while many others are concentrated in the Middle East and North Africa (20%) and sub-Saharan regions (16%). The remainder of the Muslim population is dispersed across Europe (3%), North America



(1%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (slightly less than 1%) (Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012).

The topic of faith-based reactions to traumatic experience, including refugee experiences, is paramount to the field of research in order to further the knowledge base in the impacts of worldwide ethnic conflicts on humankind (Ai, Tice, Huang, & Ishisaka, 2005). In a study on religious coping in Muslim refugees from Bosnia and Kosovo, authors (Ai, Tice, Huang, & Ishisaka, 2005) found that refugees were more hopeful and optimistic if they coped through the belief system in a given religion.

Belief in God has helped refugees cope with their experiences; it has assisted them in reacquiring some of the stability and constancy lost throughout their lives (Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007). Adhering to their beliefs in God also helped refugees in dealing with feelings of depression, loneliness, and unhappiness (Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007). Refugees often resorted to their beliefs in times of emotional support; praying to God was often a frequent form of relief for refugees when they felt the need to cope with their struggles (Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007). Additionally, refugees' spirituality and belief systems even helped them in forming relationships. Refugees reported that attending places of worship assisted them in forming contacts and helped them to locate others who shared their beliefs and other similarities (Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007).

In a study on Palestinian women who were residing in refugee camps, all respondents reported that their religious beliefs helped them to accustom themselves to their daily lives and cope with hardship, whether those hardships were a type of poverty or other form of distress (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015). Ninety-eight percent of those living in West Bank refugee camps

identified their religious identities as Muslim (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2013); Darychuk and Jackson's (2015) study represented 20 of these individuals. Respondents stated that their religious beliefs provided them with the ability to surpass their individual needs and view the environment with the scope that others shared their same struggles (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015). Religious beliefs also assist in alleviating effects in refugees such as mental health disorders (Perez, 2008). Religious beliefs serve as a strength and provide a sort of mental stability for refugees, thereby reinforcing mental health.

In reference to previous research that indicates refugees who are Muslim may rely on their faith to cope with challenges they face in the resettlement process, there is much to be considered. The September 11th attacks on New York City resulted in an uproar of questions revolving around the practices of Muslims in the United States and across the globe. The questioning of Islamic practices and Muslim beliefs as a whole has resulted in the scrutiny of refugees as well, which has brought up the question of whether or not refugees will be welcomed in the United States. One of the critical questions to consider is whether or not society will ever view Islam as a positive force that can contribute to a multicultural American society (Yazbeck-Haddad & Esposito, 2000).

### **Resiliency Theory**

Resilience is discussed greatly in social work literature, however there is no single, unanimous definition of resilience (Brom & Kleber, 2009). Resilience has been defined as both an individual trait that helps an individual to cope regardless of significant misfortune (Block & Block, 1980), and a process of development in abilities to cope regardless of significant misfortune (Masten, 2001). Professionals may often view client individuals as severely

traumatized, broken, and lacking of both strength and ability to overcome the stressor (Carp, 2010). A focus on strengths is key in resiliency theory, which may also be known as the strengths perspective. The strengths perspective, which is extensive, views all individuals as having strengths and capacities (McCashen, 2005, p. 9).

In terms of resilience in refugees, there are several factors that are involved in their abilities to cope and progress in their lives despite their circumstances. Social support networks have proven to be highly beneficial in the lives of refugees. Social comparisons (the act of comparing oneself to the rest of society) also have a great effect on the well-being individuals (Hooberman, Rosenfeld, Ramussen, & Keller, 2010). There is more of a focus on downward social comparison and greater distress, as opposed to an upward social comparison way of thinking (Hooberman, Rosenfeld, Ramussen, & Keller, 2010). In a meta-analysis of sources of resilience in refugees, authors (Sleijpen, Boeije, Kleber, and Mooren, 2015) found six reoccurring sources of resilience in refugees, which consisted of: social support, acculturation strategies, education, religion, avoidance, and hope. These methods of resilience also helped refugees by causing an increase in feeling free from harm, having control of their sense of selves, preserving their senses of self-esteem, maintaining healthy relationships, and minimizing stress (Sleijpen, Boeije, Kleber, and Mooren, 2015). The concept of resilience and resiliency theory has guided the structure and development of the present study.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used in this study in order to gather in-depth data of participants' lives and experiences. This qualitative study consisted of interviews conducted with Muslim refugees from Syria. Prior to the study's onset, it was reviewed and approved by the

University of Texas at Arlington Institutional Review Board (Protocol# 2016-6092). The sample size was 10. Recorded interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length. An interpreter was utilized in communicating with participants, and a verbal consent process was also employed. Recordings were transcribed and interpreted with the help of the translator. Confidentiality/anonymity was achieved by interviewing one participant at a time and not recording identifying information of participants; only the research team had access to the data collected. A verbal consent process also ensured confidentiality/anonymity, since participants' identifying information was not recorded on paper.

Participants included adults over the age of 18 with refugee status who have resettled to the United States within the past three years. Syrian participants were recruited through a contact from ICNA (Islamic Circle of North America) Relief, a non-profit, DFW based humanitarian/relief organization; research participants were gathered through a snowball approach. Interviews took place in participants' homes. Participants were asked a combination of close- and open-ended questions. The questions consisted of demographic information, inquiries revolving around strengths, resiliency/coping mechanisms, and traumatic experiences. The researcher concluded by opening the floor to any other points that respondents wanted to address or discuss.

#### Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach to analysis was utilized after the interviews had been transcribed verbatim. Grounded theory is built upon the foundation that data informs social research (Glaser & Strauss, 2009, p. 2). The interviews were coded independently by the researchers, then themes were established based on commonalities discovered across the coded content. The coding methodology used was line by line open coding, which takes into

consideration the initial ideas, thoughts, and perceptions of the data (Creswell, 2007).

Researchers then met for axial coding; by this, open codes were put into major themes (Creswell, 2007). Axial codes were then collaborated and finalized as predominant themes (Mitschke, D., Praetorius, R., Kelly, D., Small, E., & Kim, E., 2016). Major themes were identified and were presented with verbatim quotations that exemplified each theme's content. In this way, an understanding of the role of the Muslim religion in the lives of a group of resettled refugees from Syria was established.

### Results

There were a total of 10 participants in this qualitative study. Research participants composed of eight females and two males; their ages ranged from 18 years to 50 years with a mean age of 34.8 and a median age of 36. All but one participant had three or more children. A good deal of variation in the level of educational attainment was represented by the sample, ranging from middle school education to college graduates. Participants' length of time in the United States ranged from a minimum of three months to a maximum of two years, with a mean duration of 14 months. Participants emigrated from a number of geographical regions in Syria, including Homs, Dra'aa, Damascus, and Idlib.

Table 1

#### Demographics of Study Sample

Characteristic	N	Percentage of total
Age		
<20	1	10%
20-29	2	20%

30-39	4	40%
40-49	2	20%
>50	1	10%
Marital Status		
Married	9	90%
Unmarried	1	10%
Gender		
Male	2	20%
Female	8	80%

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There were a number of themes identified in the results of this study. Predominant themes established from the study include: religious ideologies, challenges as new religious minorities in the United States, resettlement issues, and the benefits of resettlement. In addition to these major themes, several minor themes, to be described below, were extracted from the major themes.

#### Major Theme: Religious Ideologies

This theme was the predominant focus of the study — the scope of how religious beliefs and practices affect resilience in resettled Syrian Muslim refugees. All of the participants interviewed discussed the primary role of Islam in their lives, and saw their faith as the most important aspect of their personhood. For many, identifying as Muslim was an essential part of their identity and a source of comfort, strength, and pride. Several subthemes were identified through the analysis of the importance of religion, including religious identity, the role of religion, and religion as resilience.

#### Subtheme: Religious Identity

Religious identity refers to one's identification of the self in reference to religion. In this study, religious identity was the act or belief of one's own spirituality and its effects on being a Syrian Muslim refugee. Participants reiterated religious identity in a variety of ways. Syrian refugees expressed pride in not only being Muslim, but also in being different. One woman shared,

“I am proud to be [Muslim]. Especially here when everybody is different than me; when I walk with my *hijab* [Islamic headcovering] on my head it makes me extremely proud that I am different than others.”

Participants also mentioned the importance of religious freedom in their daily lives as Syrian Muslims living in the United States. The political tumult in Syria may have played a major contributing factor in the mechanisms by which refugees viewed freedom and government rule. Furthermore, since the conflict in Syria originated through a religious basis, refugees were especially conscious of the differences in practicing religion in the United States as opposed to practicing religion in Syria. As one participant shared,

“First of all, the education of my kids and the freedom of this country — nobody asks what religion I am or what country I'm from...my son goes to school and is so happy with it, my daughter is working and the future is [bright].”

Freedom was observed through more than the perspective of religion. Additionally, it was indicated as a factor for seeking employment, establishing one's own residence, and maintaining an individual sense of identification. When asked about how religious practices related to positive experiences as a Syrian Muslim refugee in the United States, a mother of two disabled children (five total) stated the following:

“The only thing positive is that my son is going to school. We are [here] legal (in the United States) but in Jordan, if they see us in the street, they may take us back to camp because we are illegal in the city. Every Syrian refugee has to be in the camp, he/she cannot work and if they took our ID and saw that we are Syrians they may take us to [back to] camp.”

Lastly, participants had many attributions to religious identity in terms of their children. Parents expressed the importance of their children keeping their Muslim faith and traditions alive despite being minorities in the United States. One participant stated the following:

“...I am afraid for my children. They may change over time, but I am going to work a lot to keep them on the right track.”

The variance in the education system for children in the United States proved to affect the religious identity of participants' lives. Notwithstanding, the call to prayer which is offered five times a day in countries in which Islam is the predominant religion, also played a role in sustaining one's religious identity. As one mother explained,

“I was scared for my children, they're studying in a public and not Islamic school — there is no Arabic language or Islamic studies. Everything is different here because of the way they treat people, the way they dress, [and] the food is also different. There is no call to prayer so I have to remind [them] that it is time for prayer.”

Religious identity proved to be a crucial part of participants' self-perceptions and impacts on the future. Syrian Muslim refugees' ideas about religion in accordance to themselves and their children demonstrated significant influence on their well-being.

Subtheme: Role of Religion



Religion acted as a vital part of participants' lives throughout all interviews. In fact, participants used religion in order to help with guiding life decisions and behaviors. According to one participant,

“It means everything. Like, being Muslim, guides me to the right thing, lets me know who I am, doesn't confuse me, it sets [for] me rules, you have to follow these rules so I don't get confused with the things around me.”

Religion also helped individuals have hope for the future. Many participants talked about how they used Islam to sustain them during dark times and provide them with hope that their situations would improve over time. One participant shared,

“I thank God for Islam — it means that all difficulties I face now, I hope that I [will] get something beautiful at the end of it.”

Still others discussed their faith as a reciprocal relationship with God. One participant described her faith as a give-and-take relationship in which she would be rewarded for following God's rules. She explained,

“First we have to follow the rules that God set for us, like staying on prayer time and things that God asked us for. Then God will give you the patience.”

Another participant described this reciprocity as providing reassurance and sustenance when encountering difficulties in life. She shared,

“All praise to God, it [my faith] makes me more alert about not *halaal* (permissible - in terms of edible things) products and things that are happening around me...sometimes I feel down in my faith because of my son, I can't handle it anymore and God helps me to make it up...to keep it together.

Still others described the role of God in their lives as that of a Protector, offering strength and protecting them from harm. One participant shared a common sentiment across interviewees,

“All praise to God, always. We are living in God’s protection.”

Furthermore, religion provided participants with a sense of entitlement for rights and freedom:

“There is no difference in my faith [in my status as a refugee]. I can practice all my religious things without any...it’s freedom and we have rights.”

Lastly, but certainly not the least, interviewees noted the importance of God always being with them. One participant shared simply,

“Always, He is with me.”

In another instance, an individual emphasized the assistance of God easily available even when one is not even anticipating it, sharing,

“...I knew that God [was] standing with me when I came here; when I came here and found a lot of Syrian people, I knew I was not alone. When you know and when you feel that you need someone to help or be with you, God just sends it to you [when] you are not even expecting it.”

Religion played a monumental role in the lives of all research participants. For some, God was a Protector, and for others, He was the Planner of all things. Still, others saw their faith as a part of their coping mechanisms.

Subtheme: Religion as Resilience

Resilience was attributed to faith in God, and participants were able to attribute their religion to just about any aspect of their lifespan. Individuals sought strength in God's plan on multiple occasions. As one participant shared,

“When I first came here I felt lonely but I did not tell anybody; I almost said, ‘I wish I didn't come here...’ I remembered that my travel [plans] to come here cancelled a few times but [*subhanAllah* - glorified be the Lord] when God chooses something it is going to be good for you.”

Another participant put trust in God's plan as being the best plan specified at that time for a definite reason, saying,

“...When people have faith that the Lord of the Worlds chooses that for them, they believe that it's good for them and that's why it was chosen.”

Moreover, this participant believed in God's plan of being placed in America entirely:

“When God chose us to move around from one country to another it was hard but, all praise to God, we believe that the Lord of the Worlds chose the right thing for us to come from Syria to Jordan to America and it gave us patience that a good thing will come.”

Religious beliefs explicitly helped participants cope with tragedy. Several used their faith to give them patience. As one participant noted,

“I use my religion with [as] patience, because when I first came here I did not know anybody. I use the patience that my religion taught me [to cope].”

Participants viewed religion as a way to deal with materialistic losses, which they did not consider losses at all. Strikingly, one individual noted,

“... The thing that I most remember is that we left the war without any losses.”

This sample of Syrian Muslims found strength through their religious beliefs despite their status as refugees in the United States. Despite this resiliency, the challenges they have experienced related to resettlement were numerous, and for many, ongoing.

Major Theme: Challenges as New Religious Minorities in the United States

A number of participants remarked that the mainstream way of life in the United States was very different than the mainstream lifestyle in Syria. There were significant contrasts between being a member of the majority in Syria and being a religious minority in the United States. That Syrians are both ethnic and religious minorities contributes to a number of challenges for participants. Many individuals were perplexed at the changes in systemic ideologies, as described below:

“Life in Syria is better. It’s better because it’s the same - it’s our country and we know a lot about it, all people are Muslims and the same, the culture is the same. It’s really different than here.”

Differences were very prominent due to the stark differences in cultures: America is known as a diverse country often described with the “melting pot” metaphor, and Syria is much like most other countries which consist predominantly of their own people. Participants were very specific in terms of mentioning occurrences with which they were not familiar. Several individuals mentioned the differences in dress of American people. Additionally, they mentioned the substance of alcohol, which is not permitted in Islamic beliefs and practices. When referring to Islamic beliefs and practices, research participants also mentioned the discomfort of restaurants being open during the holy month of fasting, *Ramadan*, and how different that was from their home countries — in Muslim countries, restaurants and various other businesses are

closed during the day while followers observe their fasts throughout the daytime hours. One participant, a high school senior, mentioned the culture shock she experienced at the homecoming dance:

“... everybody was dancing and everything I’m like, ‘Why? I’m wearing *hijaab*, I can’t do [dance] like them.’ But I mean, we had fun.”

A difference in women’s lives was alluded to by the same participant, who also happened to be the youngest interviewee. It is of vital importance to recognize that the practices in numerous middle eastern countries are due to cultural, as opposed to religious, expectations. The participant described a brief outline of the potential differences in women’s lives below:

“Uhm, I don’t remember a lot about my country because I left when I was 12 years old, so, yeah...but I think it’s too different, like everything. There the women can work but they, most of them don’t ride cars or go by themselves. And [at] age 21-23 they have to get married or get engaged and things. And everybody knows everybody and everybody visits everybody.”

Syrian Muslim refugees, like many other minorities in the United States, were proficient in noticing the differences in their lifestyles in comparison to the lifestyles of the American majority.

#### Major Theme: Stressors Related to Resettlement

There were several stressors related to resettlement in participants’ lives. The two most common subthemes established consisted of challenges surrounding lifestyle and adjustment. Lifestyle challenges consisted of comparisons or relations to the lifestyle in the United States

versus the Syrian lifestyle. Adjustment challenges consisted of problems that participants faced once arriving to the United States based on likeness to Syria.

#### Subtheme: Lifestyle

Stressors related to lifestyle resettlement included aspects of everyday life that may have once been routine for participants in their homeland but became challenges once arriving to the United States as refugees. Participants reiterated the difficulties with lifestyle in several different ways. Lifestyle stressors could refer to language, finances, socialization, and transportation issues. The most common similarities in lifestyle resettlement stressors have been described.

Language proved to be the most prevalent barrier among participants. Individuals expressed the challenges associated with communication upon being resettled in the United States. Participants even stated the difficulties in assisting children with schoolwork, as the education system indubitably is different than Syria since public education in the United States is offered in English. A young mother of three boys stated:

“...The language is also hard because I do not know English, my kids go to public school and they have to learn English and I cannot even help [them] my kids. I cannot communicate with people because I do not speak English. It is the most stressful thing to not be able to communicate with the people around me.”

Furthermore, a mother of four children stated:

“Language...I understand what they talk about but I cannot answer.”

The following quote most accurately summarizes this section:

“The life system and the language are too different, we have to get used to them...it’s a problem.”

Additionally, finances were also a considerable stressor for Syrian refugees. One participant expressed the difficulty of working long hours, with his typical work day consisting of a 12-hour shift. In addition to lengthy work days, participants expressed seeking employment that had sufficient pay, as quoted:

“My husband has not found a job yet. All the money we got from the organization that brought us here has gone to [buying] a car; he found a job but the money given does not cover the things we need. [He found a job for] \$1,500/month and my [apartment with] bills is \$1,400 - without phone payments and four kids who need to dress and go to school.”

A father of five discussed issues with being dependent on his children for help with language, or interpretation. He also mentioned his difficulties not only with finances but also with other life stressors:

“I have five kids and I’m responsible for all of them which includes my wife. I have to pay and I have to work and I have to schedule doctor appointments and I do all these things by myself, my daughter can help but she can’t drive and take them and pick them up and do all the things that I can do.”

Lifestyle stressors related to resettlement predominantly consisted of language, finances, socialization, and transportation issues. These stressors were the presiding aspects of lifestyle challenges present in this study.

#### Subtheme: Adjustment

In addition to lifestyle, adjustment issues related to resettlement proved to serve as challenges for this population as well. There were a wide variation of issues related to adjustment

for the sample interviewed in this study. Adjustment issues related to resettlement denoted the adaptation to American laws, ways of life, and differences in policies and procedures. The complexity of the American life was elaborated upon in various ways, as described below:

“In Syria the life is too simple but here there is a lot of confusion and [it is too] complicated.”

Another participant stated,

“In the United States the life is organized a lot, like the laws, etc. In Syria it was much simpler than here, like if you’re sick you don’t have to make an appointment, you can just go to the doctor and he’ll be waiting for you. If you want to get any medicine you can go to the pharmacy and say “I want this medicine,” and they’ll give it to you. The social communication [in Syria] is much better than here. [Here] people don’t visit each other, and the family [system], after the guy or girl turns 18 he or she can leave the family and go. [In Syria] the people have time to ask about [each other].”

Participants stated the weather [heat] was also a difficult factor to readjustment (considering the interviews were conducted close to the summer months). On a separate note, refugees had a difficult experience adjusting to the transition at a social level. Individuals revealed that they had troubles with missing family back home in Syria, feelings of loneliness in the United States, and the difference in dynamics of families not socializing with each other as compared to the traditions in Syria. A number of participants described the hurdles associated with having to depend on organizations to obtain household goods (such as furniture), and took time in learning to understand rules and customs. Furthermore, some participants described their



concerns with safety in their neighborhoods or in the United States in general, especially due to violence.

A quote highlighting the distinctions between the vast differences of refugees' life in Syria in comparison to the life they now have in the United States was explained by one participant, who shared,

“There are huge differences. [Example:] The weather, here it is not safe for kids to play around by themselves without people [watching them]. Kids in Syria play around and out of the house, they go to school by themselves and it's safe but here it is really not. And the neighbors know each other. The laws here [state] the kids can't play outside, they are not allowed to do it. When I want to put something on my balcony, it is also not allowed. There is a huge difference. When I want to walk around at night around nine or ten o'clock, they do not allow us to walk around and do things.”

Stressors related to resettlement are vast and comprehensive; the subthemes discussed in this paper of lifestyle and adjustment are only two of countless challenges that Syrian refugees may face. Lifestyle and adjustment were the major subthemes outlined in this paper due to participants' responses and common grounds found in this study. It is imperative for researchers to accept that resettlement stressors consist of a myriad of possibilities.

#### Major Theme: Benefits of Resettlement

Despite significant challenges in resettlement, participants noted a number of benefits and positive outcomes that resulted from their arrival in the United States. Some individuals who participated in this study came from families who had children that qualified as having special needs. These families in particular were very grateful for education opportunities tailored to their

children's specific necessities. Most individuals stated they felt safe in their given environments with the exception of a few outliers, mentioned in previous paragraphs. The availability of the ease in access to technology was alluded to and discussed in comparison to the lack of technological accessibility by the Syrian government. Opportunities were mentioned with very hopeful outlook for not only the current situation, but also for the future:

“I came here, continued my education, learned a new language, [set]ting my future the way that I want[ed] it to be, experienc[ed]ing a new culture, you can say, I mean, knowing new people, like having friends that I can't before imagine that I may have them [one day].”

Syrian Muslim refugees utilized their religious beliefs, practices, and principles in order to cope with difficulties and stressors present in their lives. All interviewees displayed the significant impact of religion on their lives and its ramifications on their ways of living in the United States under refugee status.

## **Discussion**

### Religious Ideologies

Participants displayed very strong religious beliefs. All of the refugees interviewed for this study had experienced extreme hardships in Syria and described challenging circumstances that surrounded harrowing escapes from violence and life-threatening situations. That each of the participants relied on their faith to persevere through these challenges speaks to the power of the Islamic faith in their lives.

The role of religion as a protective factor is not new; in fact, numerous studies have demonstrated the importance that religion can have in helping people cope with challenging

situations. In research conducted with refugees specifically, Ai, Tice, Huang, and Ishisaka (2005) stated that refugees held higher measures of optimistic beliefs if they followed a given belief system. The findings of the present study support this, as a number of interviewees discussed their faith served as providing them hope for the future and a sense that a positive resolution would be an eventual outcome.

The refugees in this study used their faith as a means of coping, hope, and finding the optimistic outlook in any given situation. Patience was a key factor in association with religious coping. In comparison to prior research, belief in God helped refugees cope with their experiences; it assisted them in reacquiring some of the stability and constancy lost throughout their lives (Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007). The lived experiences of refugees as related to religious ideologies in this study speaks volumes since both are positively correlated. Nonetheless, many refugees faced difficulties of some sort.

#### Challenges as New Religious Minorities in the United States

Refugees residing in the United States faced several challenges as new religious minorities — whether the challenges were culture shock, adjustment to American lifestyle, or trouble as a minority population in a majority country of other faiths. Like any minority population in a new country, they faced the typical reactions to an alternative culture. With current controversy uncovering the potential effects in the coming years, individuals are questioning whether or not society will ever view Islam as a positive force that can contribute to a multicultural American society (Yazbeck-Haddad & Esposito, 2000).

Refugees stated they felt many differences in their culture and the American culture. Not only did participants feel the religious variations, but they also felt the cultural variations as

ethnic minorities, some of which included: differences in dress, relationships, and day-to-day living. It is essential to take into consideration the fact that there are probably a variety of other differences in the ways of life of religious minorities in comparison to the living mechanisms of majority populations.

#### Stressors Related to Resettlement

Unquestionably, this sample of refugees faced challenges just as many others; challenges were narrowed to two subcategories, lifestyle and adjustment. In comparison to immigrants who may leave their countries for a better life, refugees leave their homes in order to survive (Snyder, May, Zulcic, & Gabbard, 2005). Lipson (1993) and Worthington (2001) found that refugees often have severe hardships during transit to their new destinations, in addition to culture shock, adjustment problems with language and disturbances within themselves, their communities, and their family dynamics. This study supported all of the aforementioned stressors.

Additionally, refugees in this study found the weather to be a major change. The American system of life regulation came as a significant challenge to many. Despite everything, it is imperative to note that they were able to find the positives in their situation. This sample of refugees proved to be extremely optimistic.

#### Benefits of Resettlement

Refugees were able to find immense strength and maintain an optimistic outlook in reference to all situations. Education, particularly for their children, was valued remarkably. Some refugees perceived the United States as a safe place, whilst others discerned it to be somewhat dangerous. For an in-depth definition, researchers could probe into how refugees regard safety and danger.

The introduction to refugees with special needs came as a topic of notable significance. Inadvertently, two of the families interviewed had children with intellectual disabilities, and an additional family interviewed had children with physical disabilities as a result of the war. These families were exceptionally thankful for the opportunities offered in the United States. This particular realm of focus could be highly beneficial in assessing refugees' needs in regard to those with disabilities.

### Implications

Syrian Muslim refugees can be empowered and supported by recognition and validation of their resiliency, built upon specifically by their religious beliefs, practices, and doctrines. In reference to the ongoing refugee crisis, students, researchers, and other individuals involved in academia should be cognizant of the realization that Syrian Muslim refugees highly utilize their religion as coping mechanisms. The strengths of this population are many, some of which include: spirituality, resilience, and social support. Social workers can especially build upon these strengths in practice by assisting this population in locating places of worship, validating refugees' abilities to stay resilient, and providing reassurance for their support systems.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, this population has many needs which cannot be ignored. Some of these needs include, but are not limited to: language barriers and services, access to special needs (within their language framework), and case management in general so as to monitor their needs and progress as a whole. Social workers can help by linking this population to resources specifically in their language, if possible. Special needs are particularly important to address in that they yield significant stress to family affected by those who have disabilities.

Social work policy is unquestionably affected. Future potential policies in regard to the influx of refugees entering the United States will be impactful upon the availability of services for this population. At a policy level, the results of this study uncovered the notion that refugees entering the United States do get many of their needs addressed, but there is still room for improvement. Policies in place for refugees to receive adequate services (besides the usual — food stamps, housing, etc.) could undoubtedly be ameliorated.

Researchers could refer to this study in order to expand upon its findings. For future social work research, the differences between men and women in religious beliefs as resilience could be studied. Other faith practices could be probed into in order to juxtapose comparisons between Muslim refugees and refugees of other faiths. Mental health of resettled refugees continues to be an issue that deserves the attention of researchers and practitioners alike. Burmese Muslim refugees, another group that is expanding in the United States, could also be assessed for religious beliefs and contributing resiliency factors.

### **Limitations**

This study had a sample size of 10, which is not generalizable to the population of Syrian Muslim refugees as a whole. Eighty percent of participants were female, which did not provide an equitable distribution to both sexes. Research participants were limited to one apartment complex in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, which provided a myopic perspective of viewpoints; there may have been varying findings if the study were conducted in a different geographic region or in a variety of different geographic regions. Participants in this study knew most or all of other Syrian refugee families in their apartment complex — social support systems

play an important part in people's belief systems and/or ways of life, which may have contributed to similar principles and ranges of religiosity.

Despite these limitations, the findings were extremely valuable in that all of the individuals exhibited religious beliefs and practices as resiliency factors. The incoming Syrian Muslim refugee population has not been the focus of much research to date, and these findings lend support to a small but growing body of research about the role of religion in contributing to resilience among resettled refugees. Researchers could undeniably utilize these findings in order to assess religious beliefs in Syrian Muslim refugees and potentially refugees of other ethnicities and faiths.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Syrian Muslim refugees in this study held strong religious values. These religious principles were utilized substantially as resiliency factors. The participants were able to find significant fortitude in times of adversity as a result of their Islamic faith. These findings are a beneficial addition to the realm of research involving recently resettled Syrian Muslim refugees.

## Appendix



OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION  
REGULATORY SERVICES

**Institutional Review Board  
Notification of Exemption**

August 26, 2016

Nabiha Rukhsana Hasan  
Dr. Diane B. Mitschke  
School of Social Work  
The University of Texas at Arlington  
Box 19129

Protocol Number: 2016-0692

Protocol Title: *Resilience in Seeking Refuge: Religious Coping Strategies in Muslim Refugees from Burma and Syria*

**EXEMPTION DETERMINATION**

The UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, or designee, has reviewed the above referenced study and found that it qualified for exemption under the federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects as referenced at Title 45CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, either directly or through identifiers linked to the subject; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You are therefore authorized to begin the research as of **August 26, 2016**.

Pursuant to Title 45 CFR 46.103(b)(4)(iii), investigators are required to, "promptly report to the IRB any proposed changes in the research activity, and to ensure that such changes in approved research, during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, are **not initiated without prior IRB review and approval** except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject." All proposed changes to the research must be submitted via the electronic submission system prior to implementation. Please also be advised that as the principal investigator, you are required to report local adverse (unanticipated) events to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services within 24 hours of the occurrence or upon acknowledgement of the occurrence. All investigators and key personnel identified in the protocol must have documented Human Subject Protection (HSP) Training on file with this office. Completion certificates are valid for 2 years from completion date.

The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services appreciates your continuing commitment to the protection of human research subjects. Should you have questions or require further assistance, please contact Regulatory Services at [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu) or 817-272-2105.

REGULATORY SERVICES  
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### Interview Questions

#### *Close-Ended:*

- What is your age?
- What is your sex/gender?
- What is your marital status?
- Do you have children?
- What is your education level?
- What is your occupation?
- How long has it been since your arrival to the United States?
- What region in Syria are you from?

#### *Open-Ended:*

- Describe the difficulties you had in your faith when you traveled to the United States.
- What are some difficulties you have in the United States?
- What are some challenges you are facing right now?
- What are some of the stressors you currently have in your life?
- How is life different in the United States versus life in your home country?
- How do you stay positive?
- What does it mean for you to be a Muslim?
- Could you tell a little bit about your involvement with any local mosques?
- If applicable, describe the faith experiences you had in any refugee camps.
- How has your faith affected the way you live in the United States as a refugee?

- How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God or something divine is present? (Huber & Huber, 2012)
- Could you tell about a particular experience as a refugee in which you had to use your religious beliefs to cope?
- What are some positive experiences that came as a result of being a refugee?
- If any, could you relate those experiences to your religious practices and/or beliefs?

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