

## After Trump's Election, Uncertainty For Syrian Refugees In The U.S.

Deborah Amos – NPR – November 24, 2016

Osama, a Syrian refugee who resettled five months ago in Princeton, N.J., did not sleep on election night after listening to the results.

"The whole world is affected by American elections," he said during an English lesson with his wife, Ghada, the next morning at their dining room table. The family, which still has relatives in Syria, has asked that it be identified by first names only.

Osama knows about American voters' divided response to Syrian refugees and President-elect Donald Trump's campaign promises to block Syrian refugees and send back those taken in by the U.S. But he isn't sure what to expect.

His confusion over what's ahead mirrors the concerns of many other refugee families amid post-election [reports of hate crimes](#) against minorities.

"If they bring us back, it's not a problem for us," Osama said, weighing the post-election possibility of a reversal of his U.S. resettlement and a return to a refugee camp in Jordan or even to Syria. His words seemed a bit of bravado amid the uncertainty.

Osama and his family have benefited so far from the generosity of Americans. His family's resettlement was made possible by the support of Princeton's Nassau Presbyterian Church, as well as community volunteers.

"Your situation is safe; you can stay here, no problem," Beverly Leach assures them. Leach heads a group of volunteer English-language instructors for this refugee couple.

But the Nassau church support group she is part of is anxious about implications for refugees after the election. The fearful calls and emails began coming in the day after the election, says senior pastor Dave Davis.

On the same day, Princeton's mayor, Liz Lempart, invited him and other faith leaders and community leaders to meet "to allay fears she was already hearing from immigrant communities," Davis says.

Davis' pastoral duties now include reassuring Osama's family members that their future is secure. But the future of the U.S. refugee resettlement program is now in doubt.

"That's more complicated, and probably that's where the fears really lie," he says.

The Obama administration, after admitting around 2,000 Syrian refugees during the first few years of the war, brought in [around 12,000 this year](#).

The Nassau Presbyterian Church has a long history of supporting refugees, including Cubans, Vietnamese, Bosnians and Iraqis, says Davis. In the current political climate, when Americans are divided on Syrian resettlement, it has been a high-pressure good deed.

It's been almost six months since Osama's family was introduced to the congregation. At the end of October, he and Ghada were introduced again at an adult education class before the Sunday service.

The visual change in the couple since they first arrived in Princeton was striking. Osama, in a gray puffer jacket and jeans, had become more confident. Ghada wore a stylish knit dress; a colorful headscarf framed her soft, round face. She baked Syrian sweets to go with the coffee at the gathering.

"They are doing very well. Ghada wrote her first check yesterday, the date, the name and the amount," Tom Charles told the congregation.

Charles, who heads the church's resettlement committee, meets with the family each week to go over finances. Refugees admitted to the U.S. under the federal resettlement program are expected to start working within months after arrival and become self-sufficient as government benefits taper off.

Most refugees are already working at the five-month mark. But Osama was blinded and his face scarred in an artillery attack on his uncle's home in a Damascus suburb in 2012. His disability is a hurdle.

The October church meeting was Osama's way to connect with the wider congregation through an interpreter. "We had a normal life" in Syria, he told them. "I had a small factory." He provided for his family.

His ravaged face tells the story of war and loss. But his most powerful message was unexpected, delivered in the form of a joke.

"Osama, can you tell us about Tarzan's last words?" Charles deadpanned to an audience unsure of what to expect.

"Tarzan's last famous words were, 'Who put grease on the vines?'" Osama replied in Arabic.

The audience politely waited for the translation before exploding with laughter and applause.

With a simple joke, Osama made a larger point: I am not so different from you.

But American culture is very different from family expectations learned from movies and social media. Excitement was mixed with nerves around some Halloween traditions, as the holiday approached in late October.

"We just said, it's fun, it's about collecting candy and dressing up. I think it was pretty strange for them," says Sue Jennings, part of the Nassau church team. She delivered donated costumes, a dozen pumpkins and guidance on the unfamiliar holiday.

"A jack-o-lantern is a pumpkin with a face," she explained to the Syrian children at the kitchen table, elbow-deep in orange pumpkin goop.

They knew about pumpkins, an ingredient in a savory Syrian stew. Their father, following as best he could from his perch on the couch, asked, "Why is there an American holiday that wastes so much food?"

He had been particularly anxious about Halloween, concerned that it conflicted with his Muslim faith. But he got caught up in his children's excitement over the parade at school.

He couldn't see the costumes but insisted on approving the choices, banning anything scary, involving black magic or Harry Potter.

"Superman, good," he declared, and the Disney costumes also got his OK.

On Oct. 31, his four children walked the parade route with their elementary school classmates — now part of the community that welcomed their arrival, the new start made possible by generous church support. Ghada stood with the other elementary school parents and waved as the children walked by with their friends. She marveled at the school principal wearing battery-operated cat ears and a tail.

"A hundred percent different than Syria," she said. Then she walked into the school for the Halloween party.

[http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/11/24/503146992/after-trumps-election-uncertainty-for-syrian-refugees-in-the-u-s?utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=npr&utm\\_term=nprnews&utm\\_content=2051](http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/11/24/503146992/after-trumps-election-uncertainty-for-syrian-refugees-in-the-u-s?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=2051)