

Refugee Stories

Eyad Awwadawnan: Syria to Greece

Instructions: Read the story below, published by *Slate* in 2018. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates.

Background: Eyad Awwadawnan, a university student, wrote this essay while living in a refugee camp in Greece after fleeing the civil war in Syria.

...At the end of 2015, two of my cousins were killed at the same moment [during the civil war].... When I heard this news, I and every one of my brothers went off on his own to cry and scream.... A few days later, my father said to his children, "I have sold our car, and we will leave Syria...." Tears filled our eyes, perhaps because we realized that this was the end of a country that had given us the elixir of life, the river of papyrus, and apricot orchards in its grottos.

We stayed in Turkey for a year and a half in a small apartment in Antakya. We were human animals: Our lives consisted of work, food, sleep, nothing more.... At the beginning of June 2017, my father decided there was no future for us in Turkey. Although we worked there for a year and a half, we were never paid enough to save anything. We had to borrow the money to go.

The agreement we made with a smuggler was to pay him \$500 per person for passage to Greece on a small rubber boat.... We were packed into a closed van, standing like cattle for two hours. It was suffocating, the crying of children and pregnant women, every man cursing.... From [where the van stopped] we walked for half an hour until we met the Turkish smugglers on the beach. They forced us to carry the boat and inflate it.

[W]e spent three hours packed in a boat just 7½ meters [about 25 feet] long. Most of us had no life jackets even though we couldn't swim. The driver was not more than 16, steering without a compass to guide us across the Aegean [Sea] toward an island. With every wave, the boat was forced in a different direction. Vomit filled our luggage. We were crushed together so tightly that there was an old woman sitting on my feet, and I lost all sense of feeling.

Three hours later, we saw a boat approaching us...and we saw a banner reading "Frontex" [the European Border and Coast Guard Agency]. Each passenger raised his child high: We had heard that unless they see children aboard, even the European coast guard might return the boat to Turkey.

We were taken to Samos island [in Greece] and spent our first night on the floor of the police station in the refugee camp.

The next day, we were taken out of the police station. We thought they would put us in a container or tent, but the camp official pointed to an empty patch of ground and said, "Find a place and make that your house." I asked an official if it was possible to give us a small tent to protect my 9-month-old sister from summer insects. The answer was shocking: "I am sorry. This is not my decision to make. Good luck?..."

For 10 months now, I have been waiting.... So far, we do not know whether our family will remain together or be torn apart. I no longer care about my future, only that my family is together.

Refugee Stories

Tetiana: Ukraine to Moldova

Instructions: Read the story below, published by the World Health Organization in 2023. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates.

Background: Tetiana fled her home following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

My experiences have made me much older than my actual age.... I am full of years.

On the morning of 24 February 2022, we were woken at 5 a.m. by the sound of bombing. Our home is close to a [Ukrainian] military camp, so we were used to the sound of weapons. It was still dark, but when I checked my phone, I saw that the bombing [by Russia's military] was happening all over Ukraine.

On the 7th of March the bombing was particularly intense in our neighborhood. We could hear the missiles very clearly. My husband told me that the most important thing to him was knowing that [our son] Bogdan and I were safe, and we should leave Ukraine.... I could see how terrified [Bogdan] was from the bombing. Each night in the cellar I brought a bag, which contained some clothes, our identity documents and essentials, in case our home was destroyed.

We decided to go to Moldova because my father comes from there and it was the closest border crossing.... The journey was expensive as everyone was trying to leave at the same time because of the intensity of the bombing.

The journey was extremely dangerous.... The air raid sirens started as we were on our way...and we were stuck for 4 hours with the bombs going over our heads but unable to shelter. It was the worst experience of my entire life. Eventually the air raids stopped and we were able to continue. The border with Moldova is only 100 km [62 miles] away, but it took us 12 hours to drive there. We were exhausted when we arrived, but the Moldovan volunteers welcomed us so warmly....

At the start I was suffering from depression. It was extremely painful for us to hear about what was happening in Ukraine. I felt guilty that I was safe and that my family and friends were having to live through the bombing and the war. Several of my school friends were enlisted in the army and have been killed [in the war with Russia]. My mother's village was occupied and we weren't able to communicate with her, so we didn't know whether she was alive and I was terrified about whether something had happened to her or my grandfather....

[Bogdan is] attending kindergarten and he's made friends.... I've got a cleaning job which means that I have some money to buy what we need. I'm taking some courses in beauty therapy, which I hope to be able to practice when I eventually return to my motherland. My mum has managed to join us in Moldova, which is a huge relief. Things are difficult for my husband, but we speak as often as we can, which is sometimes a challenge because of the lack of electricity.

My hope for the future is for peace in Ukraine and that I will be able to return to my country.... But in the meantime, I'm learning to live in the moment, and I know that by confronting my fears and trying new things I can move forward.

Refugee Stories

María: Venezuela to the United States

Instructions: Read the story below, published by Human Rights Watch, an international human rights advocacy and watchdog organization, in 2023. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates.

Background: María fled her home in response to the extreme economic and political crisis in Venezuela.

I left Venezuela, why? Because of the country's situation. I work so much and much and much.... Why... can't I afford anything for my daughter? I decided to go to Ecuador.

I left with my brother, he was seventeen and I was twenty-one years old. We walked all the way...to Ecuador, twelve days, just the two of us. When we got to Ecuador, that same day I started working.... I then brought my mom and my family....

I was in a relationship [in Ecuador] that turned really bad.... After I filed a restraining order, he tried to kill me. Three days later I decided to come here [to the United States].

Leaving her children, her brother, and her mother in Ecuador, María traveled with a friend to Mexico. They traveled through an area in Panama called the Darién Gap in September 2022. This mountainous rainforest is dangerous not just because of the terrain but also because of the armed criminal groups that steal from travelers and harm them.

[It took us] seven days [to get through the Darién Gap]. You see dead people, you see animals...you hear them at night. You have to put cleaning fluid around the tent so that the snakes don't get in. The rain is devastating. You are wet, the tent is wet, your clothes are wet, you are freezing. Your boots are wet, but you can't take them off or something might bite you. And as you move forward you start seeing, the smell of the dead is really strong....

We ran out of water for two days. We were almost at the last stop, and I fell on my knees, and I told my best friend: "Man, I can't go any further, if you get out of here please tell my mom and my children that I love them but I can't anymore."

María persevered and arrived in Mexico later in 2022. She worked eighteen hours a day there for a month before qualifying for a special program to enter the United States. On August 30, 2023, María's mother, brother, and children left Ecuador to try to join her in the United States.

They crossed [the Darién Gap] through Acandí, the short route. I couldn't sleep, I messaged [my mother] all the time: "Where are you? What are you doing?" They didn't answer, they had no reception. They were robbed, their bags were stolen, with the money, the phones, my children's birth certificates. Everything. I sent them \$3,000 [before their journey] and more than \$1,000 was stolen from them in the jungle, when their bags were taken. It was total anguish.

Life here [in the United States] is not easy.... I work twelve, fourteen hours a day. To make money, so that [my family can] be with me.... Because my children for me are my life.

On November 1, 2023, when the interview was conducted, María's family was in Mexico waiting for an asylum appointment with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency.

Refugee Stories

Opira: South Sudan to Uganda

Instructions: Read the story below, published by UNHCR in 2022. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates.

Background: Opira fled South Sudan because of the political, economic, and climate crises there. The combined crises have led to regional instability, civil war, and severe violence.

In 2017, I walked barefoot for days to flee the conflict in South Sudan. When I arrived in Uganda, I was registered at the Palabek Refugee Settlement and was given a 30 square meter plot of land. I could build a temporary structure there and had a little room to create a small garden.

I started gathering firewood for cooking, and cutting down trees to build a shelter. The land assigned to me was fertile, wooded, and bushy; natural resources were abundant, and I could easily grow enough crops and find firewood.

However, three years later, the rain had become unreliable, harvests had declined, and there was hardly any building material left. The beauty of the area had disappeared, and the fertile land was becoming scarcer. With the onset of drought, competition grew between refugees and the local population for the increasingly scarce natural resources, along with the perception that refugees were receiving more support. The relationship between the two communities began to deteriorate....

Climate change is altering the weather in Uganda, causing temperature increases and irregular rainfall, leading to crop and livestock losses and increasing poverty among refugees and their host communities. This [worsens] various other problems such as crime, school dropouts among children, and gender-based violence on the rise.

Even my relatives who returned to South Sudan are witnessing a deterioration in their living standards. This is attributed to several factors, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic challenges, and widespread local violence, but also extreme weather conditions. In 2021, floods displaced hundreds of thousands of pastoralists [i.e., herders or livestock farmers] from the northeastern region of the country. They displaced the residents of the Eastern Equatoria State, where my family lived and cultivated crops. This led to intense conflicts and the death of three of my relatives.

Many people are fleeing due to droughts and floods in different parts of the country. Some of my relatives who had returned to South Sudan are now coming back to Uganda because they could no longer cultivate their fields.

The climate reality in South Sudan and Uganda compels me to engage in climate action to avert disaster in both countries. I know that my effort will make a difference.

Name: _____

Refugee Stories

Nur Ayna: Myanmar to Bangladesh

Instructions: Read the story below, published by UNHCR in 2020. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates.

Background: Nur Ayna, an eighteen-year-old teacher, fled government-backed violence targeting Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority.

In Myanmar, we had our lands where we grew flowers, vegetables and many plants. We had a big house where all the family members lived together. [Three years ago the] violence and the killing [of ethnic Rohingya people] drove us to leave our homes. They burnt houses in my neighborhood. They shot and killed a lot of people in my village. We were living with fear every day. When we finally decided to leave, we had no other option.

It was the most difficult journey of my life. We walked for 13 days and nights. To cross the river, my family used a handmade bamboo raft. There were a lot of people with us—I couldn't say what the number was, it was so huge.

Today in Bangladesh, we are three siblings living with our mother in the same house. My elder sister is married and lives with her in-laws in a different camp. I have some other relatives in the camps too, but we are no longer living like we used to in Myanmar. We are all scattered in different camps. But what more can we expect while we're living in a refugee camp?...

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, I taught Rohingya [refugee] children at the Mango Temporary Learning Centre in [the] Kutupalong [refugee camp in Bangladesh]. We did not have much to teach them, but the children still enjoyed coming. They learned the alphabet, numeracy, Burmese poems and songs, and enjoyed the time with their friends. But the coronavirus pandemic has changed all of our lives.

Now we cannot go to the learning centres...so we are offering home classes as often as we can. We visit door to door to see our students and help them with their studies, so that they do not forget their lessons. It is not easy to check in on all the students at the same time. We miss doing our classes at the learning centres.

Here in the refugee camps, we...live in shelters made from tarpaulins [tarps] and bamboo. It is always difficult to live here. But I think education is the biggest problem....

I used to go to school in Myanmar, but we were not allowed to study further than high school. I only studied until the eighth grade at my school in Myanmar. We faced great discrimination....

I want formal education for our future generation. I hope someday we will have formal education for the Rohingya community. I have hope.

Since leaving Myanmar, our lives have changed completely. We do feel safe here, but we constantly think about our homes in Myanmar. I miss our home, our land, our garden and our everyday life in Myanmar. I wish to return home and get everything back. We all miss home, but we cannot go back to the same fear....

Refugee Stories

Mohanad: Sudan to United Kingdom

Instructions: Read the story below, published by the Refugee Council, a refugee support organization in the United Kingdom, in 2023. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates.

Background: Mohanad fled his home in Sudan during political violence that was made worse by a pre-existing humanitarian crisis.

My name is Mohanad and I'm from Sudan.

Refugees come here [to the United Kingdom] because they don't have a choice. If you help asylum seekers to get an education, they help themselves and the community. They contribute and improve the economy...

My message is that the waiting time in the asylum system is long—too long! I was waiting for more than one year. We need to cut long waiting times, and allow refugees to get training and education so they can work.

People are forced to leave Sudan because of war, because of genocide, because of ethnic persecution. People have heard about the war now, but they don't realize how bad it was before.

What's happening now in Sudan is heart-breaking, and we are losing hope. At first I thought I would go back to my country, but now the war is in the capital of Sudan, I don't think they will make it safe. Myself and all Sudanese, we were hoping for freedom and democracy. Now we just hope for safety, food and water. The situation has gone from bad to worse....

My journey was horrific.... I can't explain it all. I had no idea what I was going to face. I came through the desert to Libya, there was no life there. Everywhere we moved, someone would die. Moving between cities in Libya was impossible. Trying to cross the [Mediterranean] sea, it was a terrible and deadly journey. People were being killed. In France, many refugees are homeless, sleeping on the street, they can't even eat, and they face harassment from the police as well as the public.

When I arrived in the UK, it was emotional. I had been travelling for three years. I even cried when I got a room, because I had been living without a bed for three years, just a floor, because of my difficult journey.

Many British people are really amazing. I'm very grateful. Sometimes I experience racism, but most people here are open-minded. I still miss my home. If there was a choice, I would go back, but there's no choice. I'm really thankful to be here. Here I really feel safe.

I'm applying to continue my studies now.... I hope I will now be able to complete my education.

Refugee Stories

Mosab Abu Toha: Internally Displaced in Gaza

Instructions: Read the story below, published by *The New Yorker* in 2023. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates.

Background: Mosab Abu Toha, a Palestinian poet, fled his home in Gaza due to the Israeli military's bombing campaign.

It is Thursday, October 12th, and half sheets of paper are falling from the sky in Beit Lahia, the city in northern Gaza where my family's house is. Each sheet is printed with an Israeli military emblem, along with a warning: stay away from Hamas military sites and militants, and leave your homes immediately.

When I go downstairs, I find my parents and siblings packing their bags.... My uncle has called my mother to say that we can stay with his wife's family in Jabalia camp, the largest of Gaza's refugee settlements and home to tens of thousands of people....

That night, around 8:30, a blast lights up the apartment where we have taken refuge. Dust fills every corner of the room. I hear screams as loud as the explosion. I go outside, but I can hardly walk because the lanes are filled with stone and rebar [steel rods]. My brother-in-law's car, about fifty metres away, is on fire. Nearby, a house is burning....

After two days in the camp, on Saturday morning, my family has no bread to eat.... I remember that, two days before the escalation, we bought some pita [bread]. It is sitting in my fridge in Beit Lahia.

I decide to return home, but not to tell my wife or mother, because they would tell me not to go. The bike ride takes me ten minutes....

I am relieved to find my building still standing. I walk up the stairs to my third-floor apartment, stopping first in the kitchen.... There has been so little electricity that everything perishable has started to rot. But the bread is holding up....

Then, suddenly, an explosion shoves me back. It shakes the earth, the house, my heart. Books tumble from my shelves.... Notifications on my phone share breaking news: "Two big explosions in Beit Lahia. More details soon..." One idea in particular haunts me, and I cannot push it away. Will I, too, become a statistic on the news? I imagine myself dying while hearing my own name on the radio....

I call my wife, Maram. She tells me that everyone is "fine." Our kids "are watching videos on YouTube," she says. That's the only thing that can distract them from the explosions.

From the kitchen, I fetch twelve eggs, some beef and chicken, and the bread.... Before I can leave, I notice the pile of books on my desk. It seems to be waiting for me to take one, to carry it to the garden for an afternoon of reading among the fruit trees....

More notifications are lighting up my phone. Sometimes I decide not to check the news. We are part of it, I think to myself.

Refugee Stories

Habib: Afghanistan to UK

Instructions: Read the story below, published by the Refugee Council, a refugee support organization in the United Kingdom, in 2023. As you read, circle any terms that you do not understand. Be sure to clarify their meaning with your teacher or classmates. Note: Habib is a pseudonym, or false name, used to protect the person's identity.

Background: Habib fled his home in Afghanistan after the U.S. military ended its occupation and the Taliban seized control of the government.

I left Afghanistan in 2021 because I was scared that when the Taliban came, they would kill me. I left two weeks before the Taliban came, there was a lot of fighting everywhere.

When I was in Afghanistan, I worked for a development and education organization, we published school-books for Afghan children. The Taliban sent me a warning letter because of my work. They thought we were brain-washing children for democracy, by publishing non-Muslim books. The situation was very dangerous.

My wife decided I had to leave Afghanistan. She told me—at least you will still be alive.

My wife and children are still there. I have two kids, I haven't even met my second daughter. I arrived in the UK on the same day she was born.

The way here was 100% dangerous. Sometimes we didn't eat for three or four days, we just ate leaves on the trees. Sometimes we were walking, sometimes we went by car, we didn't know the way, everything was in the hands of agents [smugglers].... We were under their control. They hurt us, they swore at us, they didn't treat us as human.... We were afraid of the smugglers, but also the soldiers and the police in other countries, like Iran or Turkey—they could kill you.... The journey took me around four or five months.... I came across the [English] Channel by boat. The boat was made for five to eight people, we were more than thirty people....

It's hard to live without your family, alone.... It's really difficult for my family as well. My wife is not allowed [by the Taliban] to go outside alone.... I do the best I can for them here. I call them on the phone. The children are small, they don't understand. My first daughter, when she answers, her first words are "where are you, where are you? Come!" Sometimes, my wife tells me that she asks "everyone has a father, where is ours?" In Afghanistan there is no freedom of speech, few women's rights, nothing.

After two years, my lawyer called me and said I'd got refugee status. When I was an asylum seeker, I didn't feel like a member of society, but the day I got my decision that changed.... I can work now, I've got a job.

People hear that we're coming here for benefits. They can't imagine that someone might have to leave their own country. But your country is your country, where you live, where you're born. There are good people and bad people everywhere. The majority of Afghans are good, and if there was no war, no Taliban, we would never come here.... I hope they give me a chance to also bring my family, and one day, I hope to do something good for the British, for England.