In the following pages, you will find information regarding the history of the country that your refugee partner once called home. We recognize that it is impossible to encompass the whole story of Syria in 8 short pages, nor is it our story to completely tell, but we hope that you will find this a good introduction and primer as you begin to develop a relationship with your new friend. Don’t forget to ask questions, but respect boundaries as he or she processes a transition that is often fraught with trauma.

*Please note: We have done our best to present Syria’s history and cultural tips in an unbiased manner. You may find different sources with alternate perspectives, but know this is our best effort at providing impartial information.*

**RefugeeOne welcomes Syrian refugees**

Since 2014, due to the current crisis, RefugeeOne has resettled over 550 Syrian refugees. Visit refugeeone.org for inspirational stories of these families starting over in the US.

“We are a family that has experienced many hardships...
Sometimes it seemed like we wouldn’t be able to overcome them. But we set our minds to it, and with the help of a lot of people, we were able to do it.”

*Wafaa*

*Syrian refugee*
*Resettled by RefugeeOne*
*June 2016*

*Her story on page 4*
A Brief History of Syria (prior to 2011)

The Syrian Arab Republic, a country of diverse landscapes, religions, and peoples, has ancient roots, dating back hundreds of thousands of years. The capital city, Damascus, is one of the most continually inhabited cities in the world. Syria was a part of the Ottoman Empire from the early 1500s to the early 1900s. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire following World War I, the region was colonized by France. The chaos during World War II brought Britain to the country in 1941. Syria officially regained independence in April 1946 when all foreign troops left the country.

Syrian independence was followed by almost two decades of political instability. The Syrian people experienced a series of coups, as well as other wars and minor conflicts. For a brief period of time, Syria joined with Egypt as the United Arab Republic from 1958-1961. In 1961, Syria seceded from the United Arab Republic and called themselves the Syrian Arab Republic.

In 1963, the Ba’ath party took over with a secular, socialist regime. The new government removed dissenters, nationalized the banks, and distributed land to the peasants. They also “Arabized” school curriculum, making Arabic the official language used in schools.

Another coup followed in November 1970 when Hafiz al-Assad took power and brought political stability. However, he maintained this stability through rigged elections that kept him and his party in power. He ruled for nearly three decades until his death in 2000, when his son Bashar al-Assad was approved as president. In order for this to happen, the minimum age requirement for the presidency was lowered from 40 to 34—Bashar’s age at the time. His second term was approved in 2007. The Syrian state was under Emergency Law from the beginning of the Ba’ath party rule until 2011, denying citizens most of their constitutional rights. Many Syrians associate the Ba’ath Party and President Bashar al-Assad with corruption, nepotism, and stagnation.

The current Syrian conflict began in 2011 during the Arab Spring revolutions throughout countries in North Africa and the Middle East, including Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. (See page 4 for the story on the current conflict since 2011.)
General Info about Syria

**Population:** Estimated 18.3 million as of 2017; 22.5 million in 2012

**Area:** 71,498 square miles (slightly more than 1.5 times the size of Pennsylvania)

**Capital:** Damascus

**Leader:** Bashar al-Assad, President

**Climate:** Mostly desert. Hot, dry summers. Mild, rainy winters. Damascus sees cold weather with snow or sleet.

**Ethnic Groups:** 90% Arab; 9% Kurdish and Armenian, as well as smaller ethnic groups

**Languages:** Arabic (official), Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, English

**Religion:** 93% Muslim (majority Sunni, also Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia), 5% Christian (Greek Orthodox and Catholic, Syriac Christians, Aramaic-speaking Christians, and Armenian Catholics), 2% unaffiliated.

**Agricultural Products:** The Syrian region is known for its production of wheat, barley, cotton, lentils, chickpeas, olives, sugar beets, beef, mutton, eggs, poultry, and milk.

**Cuisine:** Syrian food makes use of produce like eggplant, zucchini, onion, garlic, tomatoes, spinach, olive oil, beans, seeds, and grains, as well as meat like lamb, mutton, and poultry. Kebabs (grilled meat), kubbeh (minced lamb and bulgur), and vine leaves stuffed with rice, meat, and vegetables are favorites. Tea and coffee are served with plenty of sugar.

**Education:** Prior to the conflict, free public education was a goal, with subsidized post-secondary education. Attendance rates were high for boys and girls, but less in rural areas. The basic literacy rate was 92% of men and 81% of women, but the conflict has taken a heavy toll. Schools are being used by various armed forces and resources are lacking. Often it’s deemed too unsafe to go to school.

**Families:** The Syrian society is largely patriarchal, with everyone under the protection and authority of the oldest man. Family reputation is very important. Women do not take their husband’s name in marriage. Gender roles in Syria vary by class, family, and whether they are in an urban or rural environment, but generally women cook, clean, and care for children. They tend to marry young. Men generally marry after they finish school and have a steady income; women marry either as young as 16 (rural and working-class) or shortly after finishing college (wealthier, more educated families). Children live with their parents until marriage.

Statistics gathered in this section were compiled from the CIA World Factbook and the PEW Research Center.
A Refugee Story

Wafaa’s family fled Syria 2013
Resettled by RefugeeOne June 2016

When Wafaa and Mahmoud’s second daughter, Malak, was born with cerebral palsy during the height of Syria’s civil war in 2013, they knew they would have to flee to protect their family and obtain treatment for their newborn daughter.

“When we found out we were approved for resettlement in the U.S., I thought of my daughter and from that moment on, I had faith that this was the right decision for my family,” said Wafaa.

More than 3 years after fleeing Syria’s violent civil war, Wafaa, Mahmoud, and their two daughters arrived in Chicago on June 13, 2016.

“Everything was new for us here—new and good,” said Wafaa. “Coming to Chicago has been like a dream come true for my family.”

The Syrian Conflict

In March 2011, amid the uprisings of the Arab Spring, and after more than 40 years of living under a dictatorship, anti-government protests began in Syria. Emergency law was in place for 48 years until 2011 and gave the government the freedom to arbitrarily arrest people and limit their rights. The government also had not invested in rural development in many years. A poorly managed 7-year drought during 2003-2010 led to displacement, higher food prices, and unemployment. Additionally, the government emphasis on education led to a high number of educated people but without enough jobs.

The government responded by meeting some requests, such as allowing new political parties, repealing the emergency law, and democratizing elections by allowing other nominees to run—although their defeat was inevitable due to government interference. At the same time they increased military force and detentions, beatings, and torture. The government released criminals and militants from prisons, many of whom became founding and contributing members of the Islamic State (ISIS).

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed mostly from defectors from the Syrian military. Soon Islamist fighters joined the uprising and by 2013, more than 1,000 loosely organized brigades were fighting the government. The opposition fighters are supported by regional Arab governments, the European Union, and the United States.

Militant groups like ISIS, including some from Iraq, took advantage of the instability and started fighting both the regime and the FSA. Some have reported that the groups are supported by some states and wealthy patrons in the region, as well as by members they have recruited from around the world.
The Syrian Refugees

As of 2014, Syria was not even in the top 30 refugee source countries, showing just how rapidly the situation has deteriorated as the war rages on. Today, it is the number one refugee source country.

Fighting and violence have continued between government forces, their allies, and oppositionists. In April 2016, the UN estimated the death toll, counting the two sides and civilians, to be more than 400,000 people. As of February 2018 the UN has recorded that 6.1 million Syrian people have been internally displaced and that 5.6 million have fled the country. Most of the Syrian refugees are being hosted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey; several hundred thousand more Syrians have registered as first-time asylum applicants in the European Union.

For those families who have fled Syria, many children born of Syrian parents are not registered with any government, leaving them “stateless,” which can limit their access to education, healthcare, and more, and leave them vulnerable to abuse. They may have trouble crossing borders and applying for refugee or asylum status without papers.

UNHCR Worldwide Fast Facts

65.6 million forcibly displaced people

which includes:

40.3 million internally displaced people
22.5 million refugees
2.8 million asylum-seekers

UNHCR statistics as of 2017
Greetings
If you are a man, be careful with how you greet women. Instead of shaking their hand, try placing your hand on your chest and saying hello. Not sure what to do? Simply observe and respond according to their cues.

Religion
Be mindful of religious customs like Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, and the festive Eid holiday, a 3-day celebration of feasting and prayer. Christian Syrians most likely will celebrate holidays at different times and a bit differently than western Christians. Eastern Orthodox Christians, for example, celebrate Christmas on January 6-7.

Food
Be sure to consider the diets of your partner when planning a meal: note that Muslim Syrians won’t eat pork, and observant Muslims also won’t drink alcohol and may not eat shellfish. Invite others to share your food, but don’t say yes right away when someone offers you theirs; the invitee is expected to decline the first time out of politeness. Make sure to have tea and coffee on hand to offer, with plenty of sugar!

Helpful Tips—Syria
Helping someone to adjust to his or her new life in the United States can be a very rewarding experience. However, there is no clear roadmap on how to do it. How you relate to your refugee partners may change over time, as they better understand American culture, integrate into this country, and become self-reliant.

There are different philosophies on how to best assist in that integration. Some recommend just being yourself, however you define that culturally, because the refugee needs to learn how to interact with Americans. Another school of thought might recommend a more gentle approach by adjusting your behavior and dress to be culturally sensitive to your partner’s values upon arrival, and especially when visiting in his or her home. One’s home should be an oasis, a place that feels safe and familiar. As time goes on, you can explain more and more about American culture in general and expected behavioral norms outside the home.

Consider the following tips as you embark on this journey. Please use your best judgment as to how to apply them in your relationship with your partner.

Traditional Syrian platter with hummus, falafel, and tabbouleh Charles / Haynes/Wikipedia Commons
Eating out
Generally, when Syrians go out to eat, one person pays the bill (usually the oldest or wealthiest male); friends/colleagues take turns paying. Splitting the check is considered impolite. You can explain that it’s acceptable here.

Conversation
Prepare yourself for what may feel like blunt, personal questions—this is a common way of getting to know you. Don’t be too alarmed if a conversation sounds like an argument. Conversations may involve raised voices, gestures, and standing closer to each other than expected. These are not necessarily meant as signs of anger but often rather of sincerity and investment. Expect jokes and witty insults in conversation, but don’t tell dirty jokes. Also, don’t take “yes” or “no” at face value. People may default to “yes” to appear polite, even if they really mean “no.” Responses like “I’ll see what I can do” or, “I’m still checking” may mean “no.”

Children
In Syria, physical discipline is customary, and there is less parental supervision. Children may be cared for by older siblings. Prior to the war, children could roam freely and safely unsupervised in their neighborhoods and villages. Also, it is normal in Syria to pick up, kiss, fawn over strangers’ children. Adjusting behavior to comply with the laws in the U.S. regarding childrearing is crucial.

School
In addition to differences in language and culture, children might not be accustomed to common American teaching styles like group work and discussions that ask them to share their opinions. If you’re working with children, help them to understand classroom expectations in the U.S.

Relationships
Syrians are not used to spending long periods of time alone. They are usually visiting friends and family every day, so help them feel less isolated as you are able. Take them on outings to a museum or the theater, as the arts are favored in Syria. Be flexible with time and understand that daily activity is taken at a relaxed pace with more time devoted to personal interactions.

Orientation
RefugeeOne provides newly-arrived refugees with a cultural orientation which they must attend. Feel free to review the topics we cover in this orientation:

- General information about Chicago, including public transit and shopping
- How to access public benefits, healthcare, and RefugeeOne services
- Laws regarding smoking, alcohol use, and safe driving
- What to do in an emergency, how to interact with the police, and how to maintain personal safety
- Rules for childcare, family life, and other relational guidelines
- How to maintain personal hygiene and keep a clean home
- Payment of rent, utilities, and other home care procedures
Timeliness
Schedules aren’t closely followed in Syrian culture. Help them understand the U.S. expectations of punctuality for employment, classes, doctor appointments, etc.

Smoking
In Syria, smoking is common, even in homes, offices, and restaurants. You can explain local laws and etiquette surrounding smoking in private and in public places.

Mental Health
Be aware of the fact that many have experienced or witnessed violence. *If you become concerned about the emotional health of your refugee partners, please encourage them to contact someone in RefugeeOne’s Wellness Program for support.*

Respect
There’s a lot of weight put on pride, dignity, strength, etc., in Syrian culture, so Syrians in the semi-dependent state of being a refugee may find the situation undignified and be reluctant to accept aid. Avoid direct criticisms and stick to indirect approaches.

Same-gender interactions
It’s common in Syrian culture for people of the same gender to hold hands, link arms or greet one another with a hug or kisses on the cheeks. This should not be taken as a sign of sexual orientation. Among Syrians, there is a general taboo against homosexuality, and LGBTQ+ people are likely to keep that aspect of their identity very private. If asked, you can talk about the customs and meanings of contact between same-gender people here and general expectations of personal space.

Final Words
While there is much more to learn, we are confident that much will be revealed through the continued development of a friendship with your refugee partner. We hope this is a helpful tool as you begin down this road of mentoring or tutoring.

About Us
Since 1982, RefugeeOne has helped more than 18,000 refugees build new lives in Chicago after fleeing war, terror, and persecution. Alongside donors and volunteers like you, RefugeeOne is there to greet refugees at the airport, support refugee children in school, help adults learn English and employable skills, connect them to their first jobs, and assist with integration into American culture. With your support, a refugee will begin his or her journey to self-reliance this year.

Sources
Material for this handout was gathered from the CIA World Factbook, Cultural Atlas, Syrian Community Network, Center for Applied Linguistics Cultural Resource Center, BBC News, Al Jazeera, and Reuters. Material was reviewed by Syrian staff members at RefugeeOne.