

Syrian Refugees Speak About New Life in Connecticut



Steve Smith Staff Writer



Syrian refugee Mohamad Albuqaai and his family were sponsored by South Church, in Glastonbury, and now reside in East Hartford. (Steve Smith/Courant Community)

Zeyad Al Abas, a Syrian refugee recently relocated to Glastonbury, told his story to the crowd at the Community Conversation on "The Muslim Ban: An Examination of the Underlying Factual, Legal, Religious, Humanitarian, Policy and Economic Considerations," on May 11 at the Riverfront Community Center.

Al Abas (via interpreter Amina Masri) spoke about the utter devastation that the war in Syria has had on his entire country, how he saw children arrested and tortured because their parents tried to exercise free speech, and how, as bombings became more regular, he and his family fled and hid in a forest for two weeks before making their way to Jordan, still hoping that somehow his country's leadership would change.

If that leadership was listening to the people, and allowed Syria to be the democracy that the people wanted, Al Abas said, he and his family, and other families, would not be looking for help from other people in other countries.

"If there was no bombing, they would not have left Syria," Masri said, adding that Al Abas came to the United States because he felt it was the only choice for his children to have a future.

Fellow Syrian Mohamad Albukaai also told his story. Both families' refuge in the United States was sponsored by Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (IRIS). The Albukaais were co-sponsored by South Church, Al Abas family by First Church.

Several panelists also spoke about the proposed Muslim Ban and its ramifications, as well as the realities of what refugees and other immigrants go through.

Anna Cabot, a professor at the University of Connecticut School of Law, said that President Donald Trump's first executive order was rescinded, and a second, revised executive order is still being debated, because it was reacted to strongly by the civil and legal communities.

"The two main constitutional problems that are being claimed about the ban are that it violates due process of the people seeking to enter the United States and of people seeking to bring their families to the United States," Cabot said. "Also, it violates the First Amendment, because it is specifically targeted at Muslims."

Giving a historical perspective was Dr. Abigail Fisher Williamson, an assistant professor of political science and public policy and law at Trinity College, who said that the United States has had a long history of ambivalence toward immigration and dramatic pendulum swings toward immigration restrictions.

In the 1830s, she said, there was outcry against of Irish and German Catholic immigrants, but little or no government restrictions. The 1917 Immigration Act started to tip the country toward restriction, in the shadows of World War I. Limits established then stayed in place until 1965.

"We see the concerns about Catholics, and they are certainly parallel to the concerns about Muslims today," she said, adding that while refugees make up a very small portion of immigrants, the American public has, historically, felt threatened by both refugees and other immigrants.

The facts, however, show that those fears have always been unfounded, and the executive orders are based on the false premise that "immigrants are dangerous."

"Immigrants have lower rates of crimes, arrests, and incarcerations than native-born Americans," she said. "Immigrants also come to the United States healthier than native-born Americans. They have lower rates of obesity and alcohol abuse. Immigrants represent the best and brightest of their nations of origin, and over time, they become more like Americans. These trends are certainly true for Muslim immigrants."

Dennis Wilson, manager with IRIS, spoke about how little of a threat immigrants are to national security, and how little of a burden they are to the economy.

"Extreme vetting is happening right now," Wilson said. "The average time it takes for someone to work their way through the process from beginning to end is between 24 and 36 months, and sometimes longer than that. The process is extremely physically and emotionally demanding."

Refugees, Wilson said, have to prove, beyond any doubt, that their lives are in danger, before the real rigorous process begins. Fewer than 1 percent of refugees who begin the screening are actually settled in the United States.

Refugees are also required to repay the government for their airfare to get to the United States. Wilson said that is an example of the message to refugees, which is "Welcome, but be ready to work." The rate of entrepreneurship among the refugee community, Wilson said, quoting a study, is twice that of the population in general. The cost of resettlement, he added, is more than doubled by refugees' eventual contributions to society.

"While we are here, we will not be a burden. We will get back on our feet," Al Abas said. "Don't think that we are a burden on your country. Once we've built up ourselves, we will be giving back to society. If Syria were to be peaceful again, and free, we would wish to go back." Albucaai was thankful to the organizations that brought him here, and also sees the migration as the reason his family has a future.

"The moment he arrived here, he felt welcome. He felt kindness from the people around him," Masri said. "He thanks the church that is sponsoring him. They're very supportive of him. He felt that, when he arrived here, that he was being welcomed by his own family, and he can't forget that."



UCONN law professor Anna Cabot said the travel restriction executive order is unconstitutional. (Steve Smith/Courant Community)



Rev. Richard Allen, of South Church, spoke about how much support he got from his congregation when he suggested they help a refugee family. (Steve Smith/Courant Community)