

Visas and qualifications: Syrian refugees in Brazil

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Brazil's humanitarian visa programme for Syrian refugees and its efforts to recognise their qualifications could offer lessons for refugee protection and integration across the region.

Syrians fleeing conflict in their country began arriving in Brazil in 2010 but it was only from 2012 onwards that Syrian asylum applications increased in the country. This increase led Brazil's National Committee for Refugees (CONARE) to approve Resolution 17/2013,¹ which established a special humanitarian visa to be granted to Syrians affected by the conflict. The resolution allowed Brazilian diplomatic missions to issue humanitarian visas to Syrians before their entry into Brazil,² and afterwards permitted these applicants to apply for asylum via a 'fast-track' procedure. In 2015, CONARE renewed the resolution for a further two years and

also signed a cooperation agreement with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to allow it to support and facilitate identification and visa procedures carried out by Brazilian embassies in countries neighbouring Syria.³ In September 2017 this resolution was renewed again, for two further years. Another important initiative was CONARE's agreement in February 2017 to resettle up to 20 unaccompanied Syrian children, a measure also approved by UNHCR.

There are now more than 2,000 Syrians refugees living in Brazil and in 2016 Syrians were the single largest national group to be granted asylum by CONARE.⁴ This

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measure of granting humanitarian visas has now been incorporated into Brazil's new migration law of 2017 (Law 13,445), and it is hoped that the availability of this type of visa will be incorporated into other Latin American countries' refugee policies as well.⁵

Although Syrian refugees can access the Bolsa-Família Program, Brazil's federal income transfer programme, preliminary research conducted with Syrian refugees in São Paulo suggests that the principal – sometimes only – help they receive is with documentation, and that they are in need of wider assistance with work, language, housing and the recognition of qualifications.⁶ Most adult Syrian refugees who have recently arrived in Brazil have had a tertiary-level education, thanks to Syria's formerly strong education system. Although some Syrians are working successfully as entrepreneurs in small businesses, mainly in the food sector, one of the challenges they face is recognition of their qualifications and the ability to exercise their professions. For refugees with unrecognised qualifications, the solution is, in many cases, to take jobs that require fewer skills and are lower paid than those they are qualified to do.

Brazil's 1997 Refugee Act states that universities and other educational institutions should facilitate the recognition of refugees' qualifications, and some universities – such as those involved with the UNHCR initiative Sérgio Vieira de Mello Academic Chair – try to implement this policy. Even in these institutions, however, there can be opposition. This occurs partly because Brazilian universities are unused to foreign students, and partly due to an elitist mind-set whereby only those qualifications obtained from elite universities are recognised.

While progress is slow, the qualifications of Syrians and other refugees are starting to be recognised, although it remains difficult to obtain authorisation to exercise professions, particularly in fields such as law and medicine. Universities and NGOs have made efforts to support Syrian refugees in their access to appropriate opportunities, including offering free Portuguese courses as insufficient grasp of the language is a considerable obstacle to obtaining better

jobs. The Brazilian government has taken steps towards providing validation of tertiary qualifications obtained outside Brazil, and accepting partial documentation and/or results from exams conducted by Brazilian universities to certify level of knowledge as proof of studies.

Brazil's initiative in welcoming Syrian refugees is partly related to its historical and cultural links with Syria and Lebanon and partly to the humanitarian role that Brazil has played in Latin America since the passing of its 1997 Refugee Act. The country's introduction of humanitarian visas and its work on validating refugees' qualifications have overall been positive developments; it remains to be seen, however, how the country will continue to develop its policies as more refugees arrive, and how its actions might advance policy for refugees elsewhere in the region.

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1. National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities, Brazil (2013) Normative Resolution No 17 of 20 September 2013 <http://bit.ly/Brazil-Syria-visas-2013>
2. Humanitarian visas have been issued by Brazilian missions located in many countries but those located in the countries hosting the greatest number of displaced Syrians – Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey – have issued the majority.
3. UNHCR (2016) *The 10-Point Plan in Action, 2016 Update*. www.refworld.org/docid/583714a44.html
4. Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública (2016) *Refúgio em Números* (Refugee in Numbers). <http://bit.ly/Brazil-Refugee-2016>
5. See also Jubilut L L, Sombra Muiños de Andrade C and de Lima Madureira A (2016) 'Humanitarian visas: building on Brazil's experience', *Forced Migration Review* issue 53 www.fmreview.org/community-protection/jubilut-andrade-madureira
6. Calegari M and Justino L (2016) 'Refugiados Sírios em São Paulo: o direito à integração' www.nepo.unicamp.br/publicacoes/anais/arquivos/9_MC.pdf