

Syrian refugees in Uruguay: an uncomfortable topic

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Only a year after Uruguay's resettlement plan for Syrian refugees was established, the resettled families said they wanted to leave. Expectations have not been met.

Uruguay was the first Latin American country since the start of the Syrian war to resettle Syrian refugees from Lebanon. However, what was designed in 2014 as a gesture of solidarity by a sympathetic, pioneering country has become an uncomfortable issue for the current government and the institutions that were involved.

In 2006, Uruguay established a Refugees Act and in 2007 joined the regional Solidarity Resettlement Programme (PRS), in light of the more than 400 refugees and asylum seekers it was then hosting from different countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe. In 2014 the government told UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, that it would be willing to resettle up to 120 Syrian refugees from Lebanon in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The duration of the programme – known as the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Programme (Programa de Reasentamiento de Personas Sirias Refugiadas, PRPSR) – was set at two years (2014-16), with a budget of about US\$2.5 million. The pre-selection of refugee families on Lebanese territory was supported by UNHCR, following the Uruguayan government's stated preference for families with a rural profile, with at least one adult in each family able to work and with at least 60% of each family to be minors. After being interviewed by a Uruguayan delegation in Beirut, five families were selected, with a total of 42 members, of whom 33 were minors.

Although it is not the first time Uruguay has offered refugee resettlement, it was the first time with such a large group and with characteristics so different from the refugees of the Latin American region. Because of this, it was considered particularly important to inform the families – before they were definitely selected – of the socio-economic reality of the country and key aspects such as the compulsory, secular education system. The Department of Social Anthropology of the University of

the Republic (UDELAR) collaborated with PRPSR in preparing information material and provided support in the selection process and, with the Arab Language faculty, provided language training for those involved in implementing the resettlement programme.

From the time of their arrival in Uruguay in October 2014, Syrian refugees received accommodation, translation services, access to the health system, inclusion in the education system (with the support of translators), job training and introduction to Uruguayan culture and customs. For the two years of the programme, they were assigned a home and a monthly income (depending on the number of children). The government provided identity and travel documents in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention. The Syrian refugees resettled in Uruguay have permanent residence as well as legal and physical protection and the same civil, economic, social and cultural rights that all Uruguayan citizens hold.

Missed expectations

By September 2015, the five resettled families were reporting difficulties in finding work, insecurity (street thefts), the high cost of living in the country, and economic problems (despite the monetary subsidy received through the programme). They held public protests, saying they would not abandon the protest until the government found a solution to their claims.

*"We are going to die here or in Syria. Here we die because we do not have money and in Syria we die because of the war."*¹

The PRPSR's representative, Javier Miranda, stated: "We believe that with this resettlement plan they can lead a dignified life. The State supports them for two years but cannot do more. Uruguay is an expensive country, it is true. And the job offers that they access are the same as those accessed by most Uruguayans."

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Testimonies of the five resettled families reflect their concern and despair: “We escape from death, from war, and we reach poverty.” Another of the complaints referenced “deception” on the part of the Uruguayan authorities in the information provided in Lebanon. “They promised us an easy life but everything is expensive ... living poor is worse than war.” They see the only way out is to return to Lebanon or “to any country in Europe” where they consider they will have a better quality of life. One of the families tried to travel to Europe but was detained at the airport in Turkey and deported to Uruguay.

Even taking into account the difficulties of integrating into a new and very different country, with a different language and culture, adaptation would usually be considered as only a matter of time. The Syrian refugees came from a country at war, so the difficulties they might encounter in the host country would surely be insignificant – it was argued – in a context of being able to live in peace. But what does peace really mean? Is it possible to have peace in an environment where one cannot earn enough to lead a decent life?

“What is in Uruguay is peace. Peace is what everyone wants but if there is peace and yet you do not have something to live for, it is not peace. ... There is no tranquility. You are always thinking, thinking about the future, and this is very difficult, more difficult than war.” (Ibrahim Alshebli, a Syrian refugee resettled in Uruguay)

Most of the families had very different living conditions before the war in Syria. They had their own business, sufficient income and a low cost of living – in a country where it was possible to support a large family on only one salary. In Uruguay the reality is different. A high cost of living, low wages and difficulties in getting work – the reasons given by the refugees for wishing to leave – are experienced by local people on a daily basis, who both agree with, and resent, the refugees’ claims. In a statement, the government emphasised that: “whether you agree or disagree with the resettlement plan, the families’ anguish is still legitimate and this situation must not promote discrimination [...]”.

How to measure success or failure?

The PRPSR was planned in two stages – five families at first, and then seven more families – but the second stage was not implemented. Government sources cited the difficulties that the refugees had in adapting, getting work and attaining economic self-sufficiency; they also mentioned difficulties experienced by the PRPSR in managing this pilot project and the need to evaluate the results of the programme before resettling more families.

Former President José Mujica, who had publicly backed the PRPSR, pointed out the benefits that would have come from receiving peasant families with many children (which would have helped resolve problems of an aging population and shortage of rural labour). His own words, that “I asked for peasants and they brought me middle-class, relatively comfortable refugees”, reflect the government’s discontent with the choice of families and the political expediency at play in selecting those of a certain demographic profile.²

Hiram Ruiz points out that ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of resettlement programmes must be considered from many angles: the country that offers it, those who execute it and those who, as beneficiaries, receive it.³ The Uruguayan programme was established with the intention of supporting those affected by the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Even though some of the families wanted to leave, the programme should not be considered a failure, as it has provided free education and considerable support for the families’ integration. However, the lack of employment opportunities and the limited economic resources available to the Syrian refugees reflect some of the PRSP’s weaknesses, which should be taken into account for any future resettlement programmes.

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<https://largocaminoaeuropa.blogspot.com/es/>

1. Personal quotations sourced from *El Observador* www.elobservador.com.uy and *El Universo* www.eluniverso.com.
2. *El Observador* TV (2015) ‘Los sirios que se quieren ir y el Uruguay imperfecto’ <http://bit.ly/EIObs-sirios-2015>
3. Hiram Ruiz (2015) *Evaluación de Programas de Reasentamiento en Argentina, Brasil, Chile, Paraguay y Uruguay*, UNHCR www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2016/10252.pdf