

# Pre-resettlement experiences: Iranians in Vienna

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**Refugees' resettlement experiences may be shaped in the stages leading up to their arrival.**

For refugees going to the United States (US), resettlement begins long before they step off the airplane in their final destination. Those selected for resettlement must first undergo pre-departure processing, which typically includes cultural orientation, official government interviews and long periods of waiting.

For many refugees destined for the US, this preparation and processing may take place in the country of asylum where they have been residing. However, for one refugee group in particular, it requires an additional temporary migration solely for the purpose of resettlement processing. The Lautenberg Amendment allows members of religious minorities in Iran to apply for resettlement to the US; since the US government cannot conduct the processing of these cases in Iran, the US has established an agreement with the Austrian government to host these refugees while they undergo the necessary procedures to apply for resettlement. Following an initial application process from Iran that may take as long as three to five years, those who have successfully passed the requisite documentation review receive a short-term visa for Austria. They then travel to Vienna about one month later to begin the pre-resettlement stage that lasts from approximately three to six months.

At first glance these seem to be the ideal conditions for a resettlement programme, as these refugees avoid physical endangerment

and risky passage, and are in the country of asylum for less than one year. Some of the refugees also embrace their temporary stay in Vienna, seeing it as moment of respite between the stresses of leaving family and friends behind in Iran and the challenges that await them in the US.

Cultural Orientation (CO) is the most obvious way that refugees' resettlement experiences are shaped by the pre-departure phase. The CO classes in Vienna form the first part of what is called the 'orientation continuum' and are followed by post-arrival orientation in the refugee's community of resettlement in the US. For Iranian refugees coming through Vienna, CO consists of five days of discussion, activities and the occasional game that cover an array of topics ranging from employment to housing to cultural adjustment – and what will be expected of them in the US.

Most importantly, the instructors focus on preparation for the challenges that await the refugees in the US. One instructor talked of setting refugees' expectations low so that they would not be disappointed once they arrive in the US. Another instructor explained on the first day of class, "If you go to the US thinking life will be like the movies, you'll be disappointed. ... [The US] is a great place, but it's not easy." Many of the young refugees have their sights set on pursuing higher education in the US, and they are disheartened when they leave

CO with the message that “universities... are too expensive for refugees”. In addition to helping refugees begin to prepare for life in a new country, CO can also – paradoxically – contribute to the uncertainty and stress associated with resettlement.

Waiting for months on end can take a toll on the refugees’ mental and emotional well-being. Two frequently cited challenges in Vienna are too much time and not enough money. Refugees have no way of knowing whether their cases will be processed in three months or drag on for seven or even eight months. Under the terms of their Austrian visas adults are not allowed to work and children are not allowed to attend school. Consequently, their time is spent waiting. As one man explained, “The first month, the second month, is good. The third month, my money starts to go down and now I want to go. Five months here and I’m not working! We need the money!”

Long periods of idle waiting plant seeds of fear and anxiety that one’s case will ultimately be denied. One man who had been in Vienna with his wife and two young sons for about six months, still without news regarding his family’s case, said: “It’s too long. .... I don’t know what’s going on... I’m [usually] active but I’m idle here. I’m very depressed.” This man came to define himself by how long his family had been in Vienna in relation to the length of stay for those around him. For every other refugee who passed us during our conversation, he knew precisely how many days they had been in Vienna and who had received news of their date of departure. One young woman explained to me how she tried to hide her anxieties from her parents, forcing herself to appear happy in front of them so as not to create another form of stress for her family.

With little else to occupy their days, these refugees are constantly dwelling on the uncertainties of their lives. Not only are they compelled to wait but they are also unable to take concrete steps towards preparing for life in the US, particularly in finding employment or beginning school. During this time, children may miss a year of school and potential employment opportunities

may pass adults by. For example, a musician was offered an opportunity to play at an event in the US that would have given him good exposure and start off his career in a new country. Unfortunately this job offer came and went as he waited in Vienna.

Money becomes another growing source of anxiety. In addition to paying for their flight from Iran to Vienna, these refugees must cover their living expenses for the duration of their stay, including rent. The sizeable expenses associated with a six-month stay in Vienna mean that refugees may have already used all of their savings before arriving in the US or may even be in debt. Moreover, some of the refugees who come through this programme are elderly or have a range of chronic health issues. Because of rumours of the high costs associated with medical treatment in Vienna and fears that exposing a medical condition might delay or even preclude resettlement, people may put off treatment until they reach the US. As a result, a refugee’s health may suffer and medical conditions may have become more severe by the time they reach the US.

While acknowledging the numerous relative advantages that these refugees have throughout their resettlement process, and while resettlement provides a critical durable solution to refugees with few other options, it is still a difficult process that may present numerous obstacles along the way; an application for resettlement does not signal the end of a refugee’s struggles. A better awareness of the pre-resettlement context could help provide greater continuity of assistance for refugees as they take on the challenges that come with resettlement in a new country.

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