

Note d'analyse n° 1
Refugees from Syria in Latin America: beyond the Rhetoric

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Screening Latin American asylum policies towards refugees from Syria

[Argentina](#)¹, [Brazil](#)², [Chile](#)³, [Venezuela](#)⁴, [Paraguay](#)⁵ and [Uruguay](#)⁶ have adopted special programs for refugees from Syria, at a time when Europe faces the daily arrival of thousands of people who have crossed the Mediterranean to find a safe haven. Other countries, [like Colombia](#)⁷, immigration officials ask “few questions” and just make the asylum process easy for Syrians who want to apply for refugee status. Whereas the European Union and some Arab countries have been criticized for failing to extend a hand to Syrians fleeing the civil war, Latin American countries have displayed a positive image of welcoming nations.

However, the numbers mentioned are far from impressive, and there are important differences between each country's asylum policies. Brazil is by far the country that has adopted the most generous policy and is currently the main destination for people seeking refuge in the region, with [more than 2,000 Syrians granted asylum in the country since the start of the Syrian conflict](#)⁸. Brazil launched a “humanitarian visa” in 2013 for any Syrian or Palestinian national that has been affected by the Syrian conflict. The resolution gives the

¹ Dirección Nacional de Migraciones, Ministerio del Interior y Transporte, “Programa Siria”, http://www.migraciones.gov.ar/pdf_varios/residencias/folleto%20informativo%20siria.pdf (10/03/2015).

² Diário Oficial da União, Seção 1, n° 185, terça-feira, September 24, 2013. <http://pesquisa.in.gov.br/imprensa/jsp/visualiza/index.jsp?jornal=1&pagina=29&data=24/09/2013> (10/03/2015).

³ “Gobierno de Chile otorgará refugio a familias sirias afectadas por la grave crisis que atraviesa su país”, *Boletín del MINREL*, September 8, 2015. <http://www.minrel.gov.cl/gobierno-de-chile-otorgara-refugio-a-familias-sirias-afectadas-por-la/minrel/2015-09-08/132629.html> (10/03/2015).

⁴ “Maduro invita a Venezuela a 20.000 sirios tras expulsar a miles de colombianos”, *Euronews*, September 8, 2015. <http://es.euronews.com/2015/09/08/maduro-invita-a-venezuela-a-20000-sirios-tras-expulsar-a-miles-de-colombianos/> (10/03/2015).

⁵ “Paraguay abre puertas para recibir a los refugiados sirios”, *La Nación*, September 10, 2015. <http://www.lanacion.com.py/2015/09/10/paraguay-abre-puertas-para-recibir-a-los-refugiados-sirios/> (10/03/2015).

⁶ Secretaría de Derechos Humanos, “Programas de reasentamiento de FAMILIAS SIRIAS en Uruguay”, <http://derechoshumanos.gub.uy/programas-de-reasentamiento-de-familias-sirias-en-uruguay/> (10/03/2015).

⁷ Sibylla Brodzinsky, “¡Bienvenido, Habibi! How Latin America is Opening its Arms to Syrian Refugees”, *Foreign Policy - Dispatch*, September 16, 2014. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/16/bienvenido-habibi/> (10/03/2015).

⁸ “Brasil acolhe mais sírios que países na rota europeia de refugiados”, *BBC Brasil*, September 9, 2015. http://www.bbc.com/portuguese/noticias/2015/09/150904_brasil_refugiados_sirios_comparacao_internacional_lgb (10/03/2015).

right to apply for refugee status once in Brazil or in the Brazilian consulates based in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey. The Ministry of Justice recently announced that the program, which was scheduled to expire on the 30th of September 2015, would be renewed for two years. Brazil's president, Dilma Rousseff, said she wanted to "reiterate the government's willingness to welcome those who, driven from their homeland, want to come, live, work and contribute to the prosperity and peace of [Brazil](#). Especially in these difficult times, these times of crisis, we have to welcome refugees with open arms"⁹. 25% of orders granting refuge over the last four years by the Brazilian Government were for Syrian citizens.

Argentina and Uruguay have also created special programs to resettle Syrian refugees. In Argentina, the "Syria Program" was established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship in October 2014 for Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria. The program is much more restrictive than the Brazilian one, since it requires demonstrating "a bond of kinship" with an Argentine citizen. In September 2015, the President of the National Commission for Refugees (CONARE), Federico Agusti, reported that Argentina only received 90 Syrian refugees. The Argentine government announced that it extended this special program for another year. Since then, the number of Syrian refugees increased to 268. 52 asylum-seekers are also under review.

Uruguay, for its part, resettled in October 2014 five Syrian families who had been living in refugee camps in Jordan in 2014. Totalling 42 people, those families are mostly composed of children. The arrival of another seven families - 72 people - which was scheduled for last February, has been postponed to the end of 2015 by the Uruguayan Government.

At the beginning of September 2015, Chile and Venezuela joined the trend and offered to receive Syrian refugees. Chile's government announced that it would take 100 families seeking refuge "to address the grave humanitarian crisis affecting thousands of Syrian citizens". The Foreign Affairs Ministry declared that it had begun reviewing the necessary paperwork to take in as quickly as possible Syrian families that seek refuge. Notably, in 2014 and 2015, 277 tourist or residence visas were already granted to Syrian citizens, according to figures from the Chilean Foreign Ministry.

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro said that his country would accept 20,000 refugees from Syria – while at the same time reiterating his support for the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, whom he described as "the only leader with authority in Syria".

According to Paraguay's National Commission for Refugees, the country has granted refuge to 23 citizens of that country, while 40 other requests are pending. Last month the Paraguayan government granted refugee status to seven people of Syrian origin who arrived in the South American country with false Israeli passports which were sold to them on a package trip to get to Spain. The seven now live in Paraguay.

⁹ "Latin American countries welcome Syrian refugees", *The Guardian*, September 9, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/09/latin-american-countries-welcome-syrian-refugees> (10/03/2015).

The secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Uruguayan [Luis Almagro called Mexico](#) to offer asylum to Syrian families¹⁰. The Mexican Senate asked the federal government to open its borders to displaced Syrian war victims. There is currently only one Syrian refugee in Mexico, a 26 years old student, who arrived with a scholarship to study in a Mexican university, thanks to [Proyecto Habesha](#)¹¹, a civil society initiative launched in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Many argue that Latin American countries should be receiving much larger numbers of Syrian refugees than they are currently doing. For example, in the case of Brazil, [Oliver Stuenkel](#) recently stated that “considering its population of 200 million, even doubling the number of refugees (...) falls short of what should be expected of a country that aims to play a leading role in global affairs – and which is home to more than 10 million people of Arabic descent”. According to him, Brazil could easily absorb 50,000 refugees¹².

A cruel lack of structures for receiving the refugees

The reasons for the lower numbers in relation to each country’s capacity include a lack of resources and inadequate policies. While refugees from Syria often praise their host societies for their cultural openness, most face huge obstacles in getting access to employment, health services, and housing. Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, and Uruguay offer temporary financial aid for housing – from some months to two years – but these programs are small and often insufficient regarding the needs. Even when they find a job, work conditions and income levels are below their expectations. Their frustration is all the greater that they were often professionals or business owners in Syria. The lack of Portuguese or Spanish language skills impacts their access to employment, recertification of professional degrees, and is also a barrier for those refugees pursuing higher education.

Due to the lack of public shelters as well as the high costs and documentation requirements, access to adequate housing is very limited. In Brazil, around 20 [Palestinian families from the refugee camp of Yarmouk in Syria](#)¹³ have been accommodated in an abandoned office block in Sao Paulo by a local Pro-Palestinian association and Terra Livre, a social movement working for land and housing. Both organizations pay for electricity and water, but the place is still a squat, and families don’t know how long they will be able to stay in it.

Civil society organizations – including Caritas and other small NGOs – try to compensate the structural weaknesses of Latin American states with language lessons and documentation, but refugees feel that they are largely on their own.

¹⁰ “Latinoamérica abre las puertas a refugiados sirios”, *Excelsior*, September 9, 2015. <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/global/2015/09/09/1044797> (10/03/2015).

¹¹ “Proyecto Habesha”, Webpage, <http://www.proyctohabesha.org/> (10/03/2015).

¹² Oliver Stuenkel, “The Refugee Crisis Presents a Chance for Emerging Countries Like Brazil to Be Players”, *The New York Times*, September 15, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/09/15/what-can-countries-do-to-help-refugees-fleeing-to-europe/the-refugee-crisis-presents-a-chance-for-emerging-countries-like-brazil-to-be-players> (10/03/2015).

¹³ “Sem-tetos acolhem refugiados sírios, palestinos e egípcios em ocupação em São Paulo”, *Opera Mundi*, September 23, 2015. http://operamundi.uol.com.br/conteudo/reportagens/41677/sem_tetos+acolhem+refugiados+sirios+palestinos+e+egipcios+em+ocupacao+em+sao+paulo.shtml (10/03/2015).

At the beginning of September 2015, five families of Syrian refugees who were granted asylum in Uruguay protested outside the president's offices, demanding they be allowed to leave the country in search of better jobs, even back in the Middle East. Most of the adults complain that Uruguay is very expensive. They also said they were afraid they will not be able to make ends meet once the government aid will run out in a year. The Uruguayan government promised [to revise its solidarity resettlement program](#)¹⁴.

It is not the first time that Latin American countries face this kind of difficulties. In 1999, Chile granted the status of refugee to [29 asylum-seekers from ex-Yugoslavia](#)¹⁵, but failed to provide them adequate living conditions. All of them left the country a few years later. The case was reported in the media, pushing Chilean government to reform its asylum policy. In 2007 and 2008, Chile and Brazil embarked in a program with UNHCR to receiving some Palestinian refugees from Iraq. If Chile seems to have learned the lessons from past experiences, [Brazil was criticized](#)¹⁶ for its poor policy for the reception and integration of those refugees.

A weak support of the Syrian-Lebanese diaspora

Countries that have adopted special programs for refugees from Syria have called for the support of the local Arab community. Established Syrian and Lebanese organizations partly play their part. In Argentina for example, the Islamic Cultural Center of Argentina (CIRA), the Federation of Argentine-Arab Entities (FEARAB), and the Orthodox Church have contributed to the elaboration of the “Syria Program”. In Brazil, several mosques are also coming forward with some practical help for those now fleeing the Middle East.

However, it is safe to say that the diaspora’s involvement in the reception of those refugees remains well below its potential. Most of the descendants of the old waves of Syrian-Lebanese immigration are now part of Latin American middle and upper classes and would have the means to provide greater assistance. Nevertheless, some fear that the arrival of Muslim refugees would change the image of the diaspora, which is mainly Christian. Adolfo Numi, Director of the Syrian Charitable Society in Chile, [recently said in an interview](#): “we want to bring Syrian refugees to Chile, but even if we do not discriminate by religion, we want the Syrian community in Chile to remain Christian in its majority (...). Following the Christian faith will make them easier to adapt to the national reality”¹⁷.

¹⁴ “Presidencia revisa el programa de reasentamiento de refugiados sirios”, *El Observador*, September 8, 2015. <http://www.observador.com.uy/presidencia-revisa-el-programa-reasentamiento-refugiados-sirios-n675724> (10/03/2015).

¹⁵ “Refugiados en Chile: los éxitos y fracasos de los programas de reasentamiento en el país”, *El Mercurio*, September 9, 2015. <http://www.emol.com/noticias/Internacional/2015/09/09/749040/Refugiados-en-Chile-Los-exitos-y-fracasos-de-los-programas-de-reasentamiento-en-el-pais.html> (10/03/2015).

¹⁶ “Refugiados palestinos de Iraq protestan porque quieren abandonar Brasil”, *Soitu.es*, June 23, 2008. http://www.soitu.es/soitu/2008/06/23/info/1214172077_832139.html (10/03/2015).

¹⁷ “Adolfo Numi: ‘No estamos preparados para recibir refugiados’”, *La Red*, September 15, 2015. <http://lared.cl/2015/entrevista-verdadera/adolfo-numi-no-estamos-preparados-para-recibir-refugiados> (03/10/2015).