



## Refugee Crises in the Middle East: A Shared Responsibility

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Remarks for

Session I: Resettlement and Integration Experiences of Syrian and Iraqi Refugees

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Hello everyone,

Allow me first to introduce myself. My name is Omar Al-Muqada, a Syrian journalist, and I've been an American resident since 2012. I'm here today to share my story with you. It's the story of an everyday man whose life took a sharp turn a few years ago in a country that has become engulfed in war and conflict. Since then, my life changed forever. I hope my story will shed some light on the kind of suffering the Syrians in general, and refugees in particular, have to endure before and after they leave their country.

Years before the Syrian revolution started, I was just a hard working journalist. One with so many ambitions and dreams, which living under the Syrian regime made it all very far fetched. It was almost impossible to have the freedom of practicing my career without being constantly harassed and questioned by the authorities. Any critical thinking or ideas would have caused me a lot of trouble. At one point, I decided to establish a private newspaper and worked hard for it, but it was shut down every time I wrote something critical about the government. Actually, writing with my real name was a suicidal thing to do. The Syrian regime used to imprison on regular bases anyone who would dare to criticize the government and its institution or if to question its legitimacy. Unfortunately, I was one of these people that was imprisoned for speaking their mind about the regime. I had a real urge to write about it, but every time I did, I had no choice but to sign my articles with a fake name. I remember my earlier pieces that I wrote were signed with the name "Zoro." It's funny, right? Couldn't be more creative!

Even writing with a fake name did not save me. I did get caught. I remember my trial took place in a military court and I was sentenced to three years in prison. I spent most of it in a terrible military prison where I was subjected to a systematic torture for four months. My torture took many different shapes. It was either with what is called a "Nazi Chair," which almost broke my back, or hanged for hours from a windowsill till I turned into a corpse.

Like many others, after my time in prison had ended, they took my ID, and my passport and threw me out of prison. I went back to my work but this time it was done even more secretly and underground.

When the revolution started in my hometown of Dara'a, the regime did not give any chance to the peaceful protest of my people. All of us were exposed to the barbaric treatment and the vicious killing by the Syrian armed forces.

Death or detention were the only possibilities left for me in my hometown. I had no choice then but to flee the country undercover. I ended up in Turkey, where I struggled to find my way in a new land. I decided to continue my work as a journalist and was fortunate to find a job, and started covering the major events that were taking place in Syria. Later that year, I was fortunate enough to get accepted for asylum in the US.

When I finally arrived in America and found myself a new home in the deep south of Arkansas, I was so pleased by the friendly atmosphere. In the town of Fayetteville, I was welcomed with open arms by everyone I met, and I became part of the community in a matter of weeks. I was astonished by the whole experience of living there.

Coming to "the land of the free" gave me the feeling of freedom I dreamt about all my life. I found the kind of freedom that I needed the most as a human being and of course as a journalist. The kind of freedom I wish to all my people who lived most of their life under a hostile regime, and were deprived of even the minimum of human rights, and on top of it, have suffered from war, bombs and death, and to be forced to run away from it all to the unknown.

Finally allow me to conclude with this poem written by Warsan Shire:

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark