

INTERNATIONAL

# Brave New





# World

**Young Muslim refugees from the war-torn Middle East are desperately trying to escape and build new lives in Europe. Will they succeed?**

BY MELISSA EDDY



**Migrants traveling from Turkey** on an overcrowded fishing boat reach the island of Lesbos, Greece, last year.



In the summer of 2015, Ahmad Dandoush, now 23, crammed himself, along with his brother and two dozen others, into a rubber boat designed for eight people. They set off from Turkey, heading across the dangerous waters of the Mediterranean for Greece.

The Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis who were packed into the tiny boat were fleeing violence and upheaval in their homelands. Each had paid \$1,000 to smugglers, hoping to reach Europe and its promise of a new life. Dandoush, who grew up in the Syrian city of Latakia, was running from that nation's civil war, which has killed close to 500,000 people and caused millions to flee for their lives.

"We all knew what happened to other refugees, that some had died," Dandoush recalls. "We just wanted to get to Greece alive."

When they reached the shores of Lesbos, Greece, Dandoush was among the first to spring from the boat—his first step on a three-month-long journey across Europe by train, by taxi, and on foot. By the time he arrived in Germany last October, the trip had taken him through five countries—Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria—cost him \$3,000, and left him 20 pounds lighter.

Dandoush is one of nearly 900,000 migrants who've made their way to Germany in the past year seeking asylum (protection given by a government to a refugee from another country). They're part of the biggest refugee crisis that Europe has experienced since the end of World War II. Germany, with its strong economy and generous social welfare benefits, has been a top destination choice for the migrants, who are mostly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

#### **A Warm Welcome & Then Backlash**

Initially, Germans welcomed them. But integrating these new arrivals, most of whom are Muslim, poses one of the biggest challenges the country has faced in decades. It wasn't long



**Ahmad Dandoush** in Weimar, Germany, where he's trying to build a new life



**A boat overcrowded with migrants** en route to Greece last year; Dandoush made the trip in a boat similar to this.

 Watch a video about migrants working in Germany at [upfrontmagazine.com](http://upfrontmagazine.com)



# A Migrant's Journey

The route Ahmad Dandoush took from Turkey to Germany over three months in 2015



## Top 5 Destinations Countries with the most applications for asylum (2015)

1. <b>GERMANY</b> 441,800	2. <b>HUNGARY</b> 174,435	3. <b>SWEDEN</b> 156,110	4. <b>AUSTRIA</b> 85,505	5. <b>ITALY</b> 83,245
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SOURCE: EUROSTAT

before a backlash against the migrants began. There were more than 1,000 attacks on refugee shelters in 2015, including 92 incidents of arson. And far-right political parties that call for closing the door to more migrants have been gaining in popularity. Those groups have targeted Muslims with their rhetoric and held sometimes violent demonstrations against the influx of foreigners.

Fears of Muslim newcomers have been heightened by terrorist attacks carried out in Europe by the Islamic State, a radical group also known as ISIS that now controls large swaths of Syria and Iraq. The attacks include the one in Paris last November, which killed 130 people.

Having made it to Germany, Dandoush

is one of the lucky ones. About 11,000 migrants are trapped in camps in Greece, held behind barbed-wire fences. Overwhelmed by the flood of migrants, several countries Dandoush passed through have since sealed their borders, and in March, the European Union reached a deal with Turkey to send some migrants back to Turkey.

From the moment he crossed the border into Germany in October 2015, Dandoush began throwing himself into adjusting to his new life. His first priority: learning German, with the help of an app developed by the German government.

Even though some Germans would rather migrants like him went back to where they came from, Dandoush wants to put down roots in Germany. First he needs the equivalent of a high school diploma so he can go to college. That, he hopes, will lead to a good job.

Dandoush fled Syria in 2014 to avoid being drafted into the army of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. The bloody civil war there, now in its sixth year, is one of the main causes of Europe's refugee crisis (*see Update: Syria's Civil War*). Dandoush went to neighboring Turkey, where he worked odd jobs. But singing is

**'They call us terrorists. . . . That really hurts because we ran from ISIS.'**



his passion, and while in Turkey he tried out for *Arab Idol*, a TV contest modeled after *American Idol*. He made it onto the show and was invited to the finals.

But by the time the call came, summer—when the waters of the Mediterranean are calmer—was nearly over, and Dandoush had saved enough money for the trip. He couldn't wait.

Dandoush had to give up his chance at stardom, but many migrants have had to endure much greater hardships.

"Many children and young people have traumatic experiences behind them, from the reasons they were forced to flee, to what may have happened en route to Europe," says Ninja Charbonneau of UNICEF.

### Fears of Extremism

Roughly a third of Germany's new arrivals are children or teens; young adults ages 18 to 25 account for almost another quarter of the refugees. Many hope to continue their education, and the German government is eager for them to do so.



An anti-migrant protest in Riesa, Germany, in 2015

What Germany doesn't want is for the newcomers to wind up living in segregated communities. It fears such areas could become fertile ground for Islamic terrorists, as they have in parts of France and Belgium.

To prevent such parallel societies from forming among the newest arrivals, the German government passed the coun-

try's first integration law. It provides refugees with housing assistance, health-care, language lessons, and help getting jobs in exchange for adopting Germany's customs and following its laws.

Adapting to a new culture is easier for young people than for their parents. Still, many struggle with the more subtle challenges. Most come from conserva-

## UPDATE: Syria's Civil War

The war has killed half a million people and displaced half the population



A baby is rescued from a bombed building in Aleppo last spring.

Nowhere is the devastation of Syria's civil war more apparent than in the ruined city of Aleppo. Once a cosmopolitan place full of shops and ancient buildings, Syria's largest city has been bombed relentlessly and, in many areas, reduced to piles of rubble.

The United Nations says 275,000 people are trapped in the rebel-held eastern part of the city. People inside the besieged area say conditions are desperate.

"Every day is worse than the last," says Bassem Ayoub, an Aleppo resident. "Every day I leave my house, I keep in mind that I might not be back. All the people are doing the same here. We're living day by day."

The conflict in Syria, which began in 2011, pits the regime of President Bashar al-Assad against rebel groups ranging from moderates seeking to oust the longtime dictator to Islamic terrorists like ISIS. The war has killed about 500,000 people and displaced half the country's prewar population of 22 million.

The war has become more complicated since Russia intervened last year to prop up Assad. There are many other groups now involved in the fighting: the Lebanon-based terrorist group Hezbollah, Shiite fighters from Iraq, and militias from Iran. The U.S. supports some of the moderate rebel groups and has called for Assad's removal from power. —Patricia Smith



# The U.S. and Refugees

The Obama administration admitted 12,500 Syrians last year and set a goal of accepting more in 2017

In September 2015, as thousands of migrants fleeing the war in Syria were dying in the Mediterranean Sea, President Barack Obama promised that the United States would do its part and accept at least 10,000 Syrian refugees over the next year.

Although the resettlement process was slowed by security checks, the U.S. met its goal this past August. By October 1, the U.S. had admitted 12,500 Syrian refugees, and set a goal of accepting even more over the next year.

However, accepting the Syrian refugees has stoked controversy. Critics say that terrorists might be let in along with the refugees. And refugee advocates say that America should be accepting far more Syrian refugees, considering the scale of the crisis in Syria and the huge number of refugees flooding into countries in the Middle East and Europe. By comparison, Canada has so far resettled more than 32,000 Syrian refugees.

In the past, the U.S. has let in tens of thousands of refugees at a time.

It admitted 111,000 Vietnamese refugees in 1979 and 207,000 in 1980, after the Vietnam War. In 1980, the U.S. also took in more than 120,000 Cuban refugees. But security concerns following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks led to a steep drop in refugee admissions.

"I understand the security delays," says Susan Martin, a migration expert at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., "but I think the government can do a lot more to make the system more efficient."

—Patricia Smith

tive Muslim countries that have male-dominated societies. In Germany, boys are confronted for the first time with women in positions of authority. And girls have to reconcile their family's expectations of modesty with the kissing couples they see on the streets and German girls wearing shorts at school.

## Hoping to Finish High School

Loreena,\* a 14-year-old from Syria, is in ninth grade at a German high school in the eastern city of Weimar, where her family now lives in a three-room apartment in a former Communist housing project. Her family belongs to the Yazidi religious minority, a group that's been targeted by ISIS. The militants have enslaved Yazidi women and girls, and forced them to marry ISIS fighters.

Like Dandoush, Loreena's goal is to finish high school so she can go to college. Loreena speaks Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkish, and she's picked up German quickly. More difficult than schoolwork is making friends with German kids.

"The German girls don't like us," she says. One classmate she worked with on a school project completely ignored her the following day when they passed each other on the street. Although Loreena doesn't wear a head scarf, one of her best friends who's also a Syrian refugee does, and the two are often taunted.

"They call us terrorists and say we

are from ISIS," she says. "That really hurts because we ran from ISIS. They chased us out of our country!"

Loreena came with her parents. Shakir Yakoupi, 16, wasn't so lucky: He's one of 14,000 unaccompanied juveniles to arrive in Germany last year. Shakir made his way from Kandahar, Afghanistan, through Iran and Turkey, and then across the Mediterranean, along the route Dandoush took. Shakir's parents sent him to Germany on his own out of fear he would be targeted by the Taliban; his father, who worked for a German government agency in Afghanistan, is now considered a traitor.

Once in Germany, each juvenile who arrives without any family is assigned a legal guardian and a place to live, either with a foster family or in a group home. They're enrolled in school and given a monthly allowance of about \$160.

At the start of school last year, Shakir landed a scholarship at a prestigious boarding school in western Germany. He began intensive language classes, as well as courses in math, science, and art. In his free time, Shakir joins pickup soccer games with his German friends on the school's campus. One of the first things he bought with his allowance was a German national team soccer jersey.

"I like the German team very much," he says in nearly fluent German.

Normally, his money goes for things like gel to style his spiky black hair, bus trips to visit his brother in another part of the country, and of course his phone. Cellphones are critical for every refugee. They serve as pocket dictionaries and translators, and they allow refugees to stay in touch with family and friends back home or in other European countries via Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp.

Back in Weimar, Dandoush has also discovered that soccer is a good way to make friends. He plays with a group of refugees and Germans once a week. The rest of his free time is devoted to improving his German. As part of that effort, he's taken to riding his bike in the park and striking up conversations with elderly Germans.

"At first they look at me kind of funny, but when I sit down next to them on the bench and start talking, I think it makes them happy," he says, smiling. "The people here are really good, really nice. Some of them just need some time to get used to us." •

**"The people here are really good, really nice. Some of them just need time to get used to us."**

Melissa Eddy covers Germany for *The New York Times*.

\*Loreena asked that her last name not be used to protect family members who remain in Syria.