

**NARRATIVE
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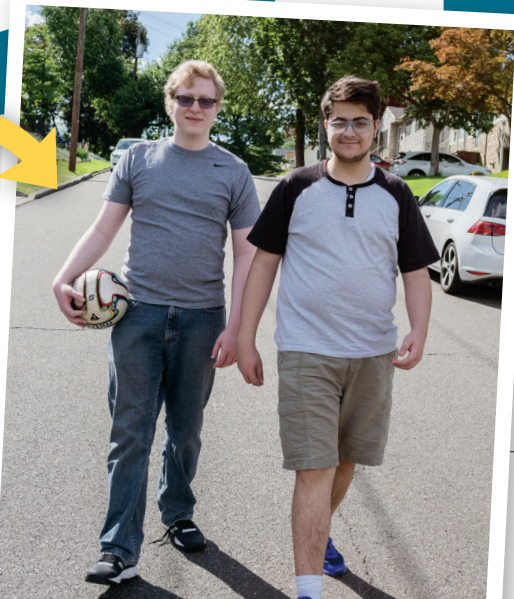
The amazing true story of two brothers,
the war in Syria, and life as refugees
in the United States

By **Kristin Lewis**

ZEIN AL-RIFAI/AFP/Getty Images (fire); Shutterstock.com (Statue of Liberty); © Tim Soter (Francois & Cedric)



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Francois Jacob (left)
and his brother, Cedric



“Wake up! Wake up!”
Francois Jacob, 15, was jolted awake by his mother’s voice. It was a hot September night in 2012, and a war plane had just dropped a bomb near their home in Aleppo, Syria.

The sound of gunfire echoed through the apartment where Francois lived with his parents and younger brother, Cedric. A battle was raging in the streets below. And now they were trapped.

Hours passed. Darkness gave way to morning light. Still, the battle went on. By 2 p.m., it was clear that the family needed to leave.

They headed down to the street. There, they found that their escape route would put them in full view of armed fighters.

“We didn’t have time to think,” Francois says. “We just ran.”

Civil War

Syria has been **embroiled** in a civil war since 2011. It began when protests against the government and President Bashar al-Assad turned violent. Four major groups, each divided into several **factions**, are now fighting for control. Some groups want a different government. Others, like Islamic State in

Iraq and Syria (ISIS), are terrorist organizations.

As the civil war raged on, Francois and Cedric watched their city reduced to rubble. Their neighborhood—where kids had once played soccer after school, and shops and restaurants had always been abuzz with activity—became littered with bullet casings and broken glass. Many of Aleppo’s factories and shops were destroyed. Whole streets were wiped off the map. One explosion shattered the window of Francois’s father’s barbershop.

For the Jacob family—and the millions of others who lived in Aleppo—the sounds of gunfire and explosions became routine. One morning in 9th-grade math, Francois heard a sound like a hand slapping a metal table. The

students knew it was an explosion somewhere close.

“Everybody either tried to make jokes to calm the situation or they cried,” Francois remembers. “The teacher said, ‘OK, OK, everybody sit down. Let’s finish this last math problem, and then we’ll go home.’”

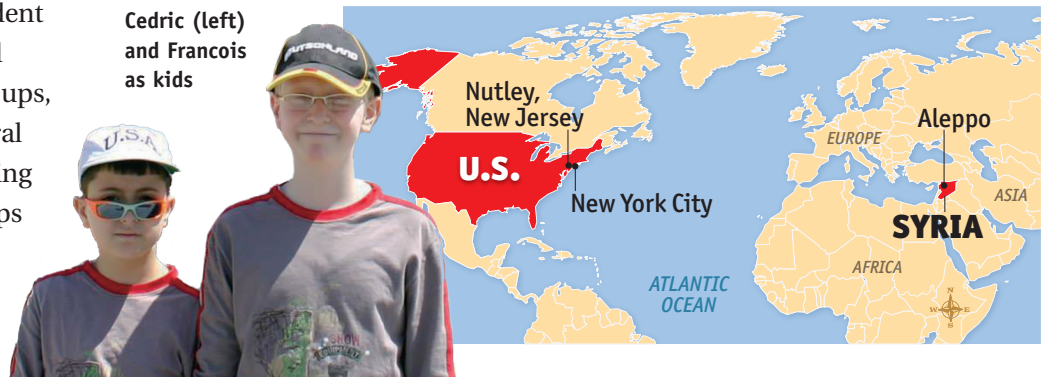
After a while, classes at Francois’s high school were moved into the basement of a church to protect students from stray bullets. Classes that weren’t needed for graduation—such as gym, art, and music—were cut. On many days, school was simply canceled. Francois worried about how the disruptions in his education would affect his future.

Fear and Chaos

Syria was collapsing into a state of fear and chaos. Life there became more and more dangerous and difficult.

The war in Syria has created one of the worst **humanitarian** crises in decades. As of today, more than 300,000 people have died. Six million Syrians have lost their homes, though they

Cedric (left) and Francois as kids





BEFORE



AFTER

In October 2014, airstrikes destroyed Aleppo's Shahba Mall. Aleppo was Syria's largest city, known for its beautiful architecture, thriving economy, and rich history. Today, much of the city is in ruins.

remain in the country. Another 5 million have fled, some with little more than what they could carry in their arms. They have streamed into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. They have piled into leaky boats, trying to cross the treacherous Mediterranean Sea to Greece and Italy. (From 2015 to 2016, at least 8,000 people died attempting this crossing.) And they have camped out on the borders of Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia, hoping desperately to be allowed through.

These men, women, and children are refugees.

Forced to Flee

Refugees are people forced to flee their countries because of war, **persecution**, violence,

or natural disasters. They leave because they have no choice: Staying means risking their lives.

For as long as there have been countries, there have been refugees. Human history is full of stories of people forced to flee their homes. In the biblical story of the exodus, the Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt, wandering the desert for 40 years. In the 17th century, thousands of Huguenots fled France so they could practice their Protestant faith freely elsewhere. In the mid-19th century, a potato famine in Ireland put nearly 4 million people at risk of starvation, and an estimated 2 million of them fled the country. After World War II, there were some 40 million refugees in Europe.

Today, there are 21 million refugees across the world, according to the United Nations. That's more than the population of Florida.

And soon, Francois and Cedric would be among them.

Just in Time

On that day in 2012 when the fighting reached their front door, the Jacob family knew that their lives were in danger. They had to get out—fast. They left their

apartment and ran down the block. Bullets whizzed around them. They ducked behind a wall to catch their breath.

Then they kept running.

At last, they reached their car. They drove to a relative's house. Francois and Cedric expected to go home in a few days. But they would never go home again.

After they left, a car bomb went off near their apartment building, blowing off their front door. In the coming days, more explosions followed. They had gotten out just in time.

Leaving Syria

For the next two years, the family lived in a safer part of Aleppo. But conditions across the city continued to **deteriorate**. Power



outages became common. Sometimes when Francois or Cedric turned on the faucet, no water came out. Food, fuel, and medicine grew scarce. Money was even scarcer. The brothers did their homework to the sound of gunfire. They spent many afternoons playing video games—a welcome distraction from the horrors beyond.

Then one day, they got a call that would change their lives. Their uncle, who lived in Albany, New York, was an American citizen. He had gotten permission for the family to come to the U.S.

“My first reaction was to be happy because Syria was extremely dangerous and had the possibility of ISIS coming closer and closer to me,” Cedric says. “I was also happy because I heard I would have more opportunities in America.”

When they got the news, the family was visiting a relative in another city. Francois’s dad made a quick trip back to Aleppo to prepare for their journey. His sons could not join him. It was too dangerous.

“I never had a chance to go back and say goodbye to my friends,” Francois says. “I never had a chance to see Aleppo, the city that I’d grown up in, and look at it one last time.”

Huge Challenges

Starting over in a new place is always a challenge, whether

“I never had a chance to go back and say goodbye to my friends.”

—Francois Jacob

you’ve moved to a new school, a new state, or a whole new country. It can be especially hard for refugees. Refugees coming to America may not be fluent in English. They may not know about traditions like Thanksgiving and prom. Sometimes refugees encounter fear and prejudice that make them feel unwelcome in their new country.

Then there are practical matters: finding jobs, getting driver’s licenses and bank accounts, and learning how to get around in a new place. Even grocery shopping can be **daunting**, with aisles full of strange foods that are nothing like what they were used to eating back home.

What’s more, many refugees, like Francois and Cedric, have escaped unspeakable horrors. They’ve lost their homes, their countries. They may have lost friends and family members too. It can take years to heal from the

traumas and losses they have survived.

Starting Over

On an October night in 2014, the Jacob family stepped off a plane at John F. Kennedy airport in New York City. Their journey from Syria had taken five weeks. They had spent five days in Lebanon, then a month in Jordan, as paperwork was filed and travel plans were finalized. After that, there was a 12-hour flight to the U.S.

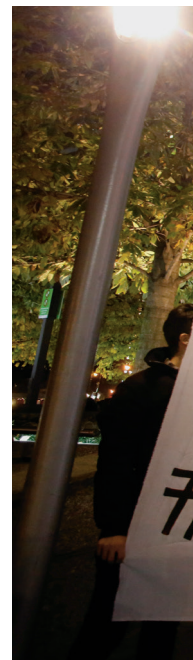
The brothers were exhausted. But they were relieved to find their uncle waiting for them.

“My first thought was, ‘This place is cold. Is this real?’” Cedric says.

The next day, their uncle took them to the house he had found for them. It was in Nutley, New Jersey.

For Francois and Cedric, starting over hasn’t always been easy. After just five days in the U.S., they started school. They knew no one. They spoke little English. Still, both brothers say they felt welcome.

“At lunch, I would sit every day by myself for 45 minutes playing on my phone,” Francois says. “Then one day, someone just said, ‘Hey, you want to come and join us?’”



Andrew Katz/Corbis via Getty Images (refugees welcome sign)



New Yorkers hold a rally in support of refugees.

After that, Francois had friends. Cedric had a similar experience at his middle school.

Looking Forward

It's been three years since Francois and Cedric came to the U.S. Cedric will soon start 11th grade. Francois is now in college. He plans to study architecture or mechanical engineering.

The brothers have come a long way. But Francois jokes that his English still needs work. "I'm not gonna lie to you," he laughs. "My spelling is still horrific."

This fall, the family is moving to Saratoga Springs, New York. Francois and Cedric look forward to living in a place known for its green trees and soft breezes.

Their dad will open a barbershop there, like the one he owned in Syria.

The brothers still think about Syria sometimes. They think about what they've lost and how their lives have changed. They wonder if they'll ever return to Syria. They wonder if they'll ever see the loved ones they left behind. But Francois tries to keep his mind off what his life in Syria would be like if he had stayed. Thoughts like those can haunt a person. And he has so much more to think about: his studies, his family's new business, his brother.

"I don't think about it too much," says Francois, "what would have been." ●

How to Help Refugees

1 Be welcoming.

A friendly smile, a warm hello, and an invitation to join you at lunch or in an after-school activity can help a refugee feel less alone. "It can be awkward to interact with people who are different," says Rachel Peric, deputy director of Welcoming America, a group that works with communities across the U.S. "But that little bit of courage to take a first step is what we need."



2 Host a dinner.

Ask your parents if you can host a dinner for a refugee family. Sharing a meal is a wonderful way to get to know someone. "Breaking bread together really unifies people," says Peric.



3 Support a family.

Find local organizations that work with refugees, such as Welcoming America or your local International Rescue Committee chapter. You can sign up to help in a number of ways, such as greeting a family at the airport, donating clothes, or helping someone practice English.

Writing Contest

According to the Tennessee Office for Refugees, "it is a badge of strength, courage, and victory" to be called a refugee. Explain how this quote applies to the article. Use text evidence. Send your essay to **From War to America Contest**. Five winners will get *The Only Road* by Alexandra Diaz.



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