

A New Link in the Chain? Arabic-Language Citizenship Education Courses and the Integration of Resettled Syrian Refugees in Canada

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[See table of contents](#)

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A New Link in the Chain? Arabic-Language Citizenship Education Courses and the Integration of Resettled Syrian Refugees in Canada

ROUBA AL-SALEM

Abstract

In 2015, following Canada's resettlement of large numbers of Syrian refugees, it was praised as a role model that should be implemented elsewhere. Or should it? With the resettlement of Syrian adult refugees as a case study, this article argues that Canada's federal and provincial efforts to promote the integration of these refugees have overlooked the contribution that citizenship and civic education activities, administered in the refugees' native language, can make towards their integration, as a way of empowering them to become active citizens in the political and civil life of the receiving country. In particular, the article critically evaluates current government-led efforts to rely on language courses as a medium for transmitting Canadian civic concepts. It also discusses why they are falling short of ensuring that these resettled refugees are saddled with the skills and know-how to navigate their rights and responsibilities as

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Résumé

En 2015, suite à la réinstallation d'un grand nombre de réfugiés syriens, le modèle canadien a été salué comme un exemple qui devrait être appliqué ailleurs. Le devrait-il

vraiment? Prenant la réinstallation de réfugiés syriens adultes comme étude de cas, cet article soutient que jusqu'à présent, les efforts du gouvernement fédéral et des gouvernements provinciaux pour promouvoir l'intégration de ces réfugiés ont négligé la contribution que les activités de citoyenneté et d'éducation civique administrées dans leur langue maternelle peut apporter à leur intégration, notamment en les habilitant à devenir des citoyens actifs dans la vie politique et civique du pays d'accueil. Plus particulièrement, cet article évalue de manière critique les efforts actuellement menés par le gouvernement, qui se fient sur les cours de langue comme médium de transmission des concepts civiques canadiens. Il traite aussi des raisons pour lesquelles ils échouent à assurer que ces réfugiés réinstallés soient équipés des compétences et savoir-faires leur permettant de contribuer efficacement à la vie politique et civique de leurs communautés. Enfin, l'article suggère que l'offre d'un cours d'éducation civique en arabe constituerait le chaînon manquant dans la chaîne des efforts menés par les gouvernements pour s'attaquer à la disparité entre l'engagement du gouvernement fédéral actuel en faveur du multiculturalisme, de l'inclusivité et de l'accueil des immigrants/réfugiés et les réalités de l'exclusion sociale sur le terrain. Ce cours constitue une voie qui doit être explorée pour encourager les réfugiés réinstallés, en tant que citoyens canadiens « en attente », à développer des liens significatifs et à contribuer à leur nouveau pays.

Introduction

The resettlement of refugees to a third country is considered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) one way in which refugees can be offered recourse to a durable solution¹ under the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees,² to which Canada is a state party.³ In fact, Canada has traditionally placed strong emphasis on the integration of immigrants and refugees, including those whom it chooses to resettle from abroad. Customarily, the country has made three main avenues available for refugee resettlement: government sponsorship, private sponsorship, and blended visa-office referred.⁴ In 2015, and as a way of sharing the burden of refugee hosting countries, Canada embarked on a bold plan to resettle tens of thousands of Syrian refugees, many of whom came from the most vulnerable segments of the refugee population. As a direct consequence of these efforts, by 2016 refugees accounted for an estimated 24 per cent of all newcomers living in Canada, compared to 50.6 per cent of who were economic migrants.⁵

These steps came in response to the Syrian conflict beginning in 2011, which generated one of the worst refugee crises in the post-Second World War era. According to the UNHCR, by December 2018 more than 5.5 million Syrians have been registered as refugees,⁶ 10 per cent of whom are in urgent need for resettlement.⁷ Since 2011, some thirty countries have made resettlement pathways for admission available to more than 162,000 Syrian refugees,⁸ including several European countries, the United States, and Canada.⁹ In the case of Canada, by 2017, an estimated 40,000 Syrian refugees were resettled in 350 locations across the country.¹⁰ Of those, approximately 21,876 (or 54.7 per cent) were government assisted refugees (GARS) while another 14,274 (35.7 per cent) were privately sponsored refugees (PSRs).¹¹ Within Canada, the French-speaking province of Quebec has also participated in the privately sponsored refugees program. Refugees were selected from the pool of Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) approved cases for resettlement, with the province administering its own private sponsorship program.¹²

The word *citizenship* has various potential meanings, “ranging from a person’s legal status within a country to their civil, political, or social standing within a community to the set of behaviors that represent a particular ideal of civic virtue.”¹³ Traditionally, federal and provincial authorities have relied on government-funded French- and English-language courses to act as a medium for introducing newly arrived adult immigrants and refugees to Canadian citizenship and civic education concepts. As Levinson highlights, when educators speak of citizenship or civic education, they think of them as “the identities, rights and obligations of residents of a country in general rather than solely those of legal citizens.”¹⁴ The ways in which immigrants and refugees secure presence and gain access to employment, immigration settlement, or resettlement services and other public services are shaped not only by their legal status and social location, but also by their contact with different actors.¹⁵ Hence, it can be argued that the decision by government authorities to rely on language courses to transmit civic education concepts is, on the face of it, both reasonable and pragmatic, for “it takes a lot of work to learn how, when, and why to exercise one’s own rights and duties, as well as to respect those of others.”¹⁶ Moreover, familiarizing citizens in a democratic society with its civic concepts is necessary if they are to navigate life responsibly and constructively and if they are to internalize ideals such as equality, mutual toleration, and respect, and to forge a common national identity.¹⁷

Nevertheless, with resettled Syrian adult refugees as a case study, this article seeks to demonstrate why these arrangements fall short of ensuring that resettled refugees gain the

necessary skills of understanding Canadian civic concepts, and why there is a need for government authorities to adopt a more socio-cultural approach, if their resettlement- and integration-related policies are to succeed.¹⁸ Many of the challenges that a large portion of resettled Syrian adult refugees (especially GARS) grapple with are compounded by pre-resettlement and post-resettlement factors that include the age and prior level of education of resettled individuals and/or their pre-immigration command of English and French.¹⁹ In this regard, the article adopts the position that these lower levels of “linguistic adjustments affect not only the earnings of immigrants and/or refugees in the labour market, but also the type of social interaction and civic participation of immigrants and refugees.”²⁰

And although Canada’s domestic policy and international obligation recognize that integration is a two-way process, one that requires adaptation not only by the newcomer, but also by its own society,²¹ all too often the public discourse has emphasized what immigrants and refugees must do to integrate, or has analyzed how federal and provincial authorities have met the immediate needs of newly resettled refugees such as health, education, employment and housing, and attainment of English- and French-language proficiency. Moreover, the possible contributions of adult civic education classes as they relate to refugees remain under-researched by academics and not visibly present in discussions or assessments by policymakers of the qualitative impact of their resettlement policies and practices. This contrasts sharply with civil society initiatives, academic research, and governmental policies that have addressed the civic education and citizenship awareness needs of migrant youth and children (including refugees), and the resulting challenges facing Canadian educational policy.²²

To make the case for the need for such courses, the article will first provide an overview of Canada’s initiative to resettle Syrian refugees, many of whom are amongst the most vulnerable. This is followed by a review of a spectrum of citizenship education activities that have been supported and promoted by government authorities (primarily at the federal level) for newcomers (both migrants and refugees). It will then summarize some of the resettlement challenges experienced by resettled Syrian adult refugees, based on the evaluations conducted by the federal government of its Syria Initiative, which arguably make the development of these courses all the more necessary. While essentially offering a review of the literature on the resettlement and integration of Syrian refugees, this review is conducted to substantiate the argument that current efforts by federal authorities to improve the resettlement and integration experience of refugees would benefit from examining how Canadian citizenship education, if implemented in the resettled refugees’

mother tongue, can improve prospects for adult refugees to feel part of the economic, social, political, and cultural fabric of Canadian society.²³ In the case of resettled Syrian refugees, it is argued here that the need to develop these courses, in Arabic, is intrinsically linked to three elements. The first is that the majority of these resettled refugees possess relatively low levels of English and French upon arrival. The second element is that exposure to Canadian civic education concepts for adult immigrants and refugees once they arrive in Canada takes place through English- and French-language courses. The third one is that in addition to all the challenges faced by any newcomers to Canada, the majority of the resettled Syrian refugees have grappled with protracted displacement, violence, trauma, and complicated health and social difficulties, and lower levels of formal education.

Conceptual Framework

While citizenship is often considered a legal binary, in that either one has it or not, often it is a concept that describes more than just a formal status that is demonstrated by the possession of a passport and of legal rights. And while many Canadians frequently take the rights and entitlements that citizenship bestows on them for granted, for others, such as “non-citizen” and “not-yet citizen” immigrants and refugees, their rights, entitlements, access to quality services, and responsibilities are less certain and cannot always be determined in black-and-white.²⁴ This is because “legal rights do not miraculously apply equally to all people in all contexts”: instead they are socially mobilized.²⁵ In addition, it is important to bear in mind that citizenship and its content are historically, socially, economically, and politically constructed, making an examination of these variables all the more necessary for understanding how exclusion and processes of exclusion are phenomena that appear at the intersection of these variables.²⁶

Theorists of space have offered a useful approach to examine ways in which individuals and groups position themselves vis-à-vis prevailing socio-political processes and practices, or the manner in which these individuals and groups are positioned by others (such as government officials, service providers, schools, etc.) vis-à-vis those processes and practices, and how the space in which they operate is stabilized or contested as a result.²⁷ The experience of resettled refugees, including Syrians refugees, seeking to integrate in the societies of their host countries sheds light on these dynamics and processes of social exclusion/inclusion. In fact, with increased mobility and distress-induced migration, “more and more people [are] inhabiting this slippery space between what rights they should and what rights they actually can access.”²⁸

And while there is not one single agreed-upon definition of what constitutes integration in the context of refugee

resettlement,²⁹ one useful definition is the one developed by the UNHCR, which underscores that it is “the end product of a multi-faceted and on-going process, of which self-reliance is but one part.... Integration requires preparedness on the part of the refugees to adapt to the host society, without having to forego their own cultural identity. From the host society, it requires communities that are welcoming and responsive to refugees, and public institutions that are able to meet the needs of a diverse population.”³⁰

In this regard, a plethora of literature has underscored the idea that integration is a multi-dimensional and two-way process.³¹ Policy debates and academic conversations regarding integration challenges faced by newly arrived migrants have focused on different dimensions of citizenship, such as the rules of entry into the collective (i.e., legal status), the benefits associated with membership (rights), and the identity of the immigrant or newcomer in the collective of the receiving state.³² They have also highlighted that the main challenges to the well-being of immigrants and refugees during settlement includes economic factors such as unemployment/underemployment, discrimination, and language barriers.³³

Nevertheless, where studies have examined the extent to which policy measures could remove barriers to integration,³⁴ all too often their emphasis has been on traditional markers of that process and on the extent to which the government has offered support in those domains. In addition, the focus has frequently been placed on what non-nationals or non-citizens must do to earn Canadian citizenship and to integrate. Consequently, they have repeatedly placed the burden of integration on the shoulders of refugees and immigrants, with any failure to integrate becoming theirs and theirs alone.³⁵

One challenge to any efforts to encourage and improve the well-being of immigrants and refugees in their host societies is that of creating a sense of belonging and social inclusion³⁶ and of promoting the resilience of newly arrived refugees as a direct objective of the resettlement efforts.³⁷ As Gutierrez notes, empowerment is crucial, because it involves “a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power,”³⁸ as a way of enhancing the strengths in individuals or communities and establishing equity in the distribution of resources.³⁹ In this regard, education has been pointed out as one element that can promote the integration of newly arrived migrants and refugees, given that it is “a key site in which both the host and incoming populations learn with, and about, one another.”⁴⁰ International studies have also underscored that command of the language of the host country is one of the most significant factors affecting settlement and integration in general and that the degree of proficiency in the host language affects inclusion by affecting the

refugees’ or migrants’ access to education, training, and the labour market, as well as their sense of “belonging.”⁴¹

Along the same line of reasoning, Boggs argues that civic education empowers citizens by allowing them to find a meaningful basis for participation in public affairs, influencing public decisions and policies to develop civic virtues and an attitude of civility towards fellow citizens as well as an interest in and understanding of practical steps to better their own lives and those of their communities.⁴² However, as the practice and theory of empowerment in social work highlights, moving individuals from apathy to action requires not only the need to develop effective interventions to empower them at the individual/micro-level by increasing their feeling of control, but also to implement strategies that develop their collective consciousness/awareness of how political structures and institutional order affect their individual and group experiences (macro-level).⁴³

Arguably, developing Canadian civic education material in Arabic has the potential of contributing to that process of empowering resettled Syrian adult refugees and of fostering their social inclusion in a country that, at least formally speaking, espouses a multicultural policy. This, I argue, is the case because such material could potentially set into motion the key dimension of citizenship: participation. It also, I maintain, affords them the opportunity to engage effectively with Canadian civic concepts in their native language, while they are learning the host country’s official languages. This, I argue, would help Syrian adult refugees overcome a key constraint that they face in their efforts to increase their individual agency and to exercise it:⁴⁴ the low levels of their command of English and French. Given that much of the research concerned with migrant adaptation and acculturation has assumed that increased participation in the host culture would require their detachment from their culture of origin, this option, of providing civic education material in the native language of resettled refugees, may never have been considered feasible by policy-makers. That point of departure may need re-evaluation.⁴⁵

Canada’s Resettlement of Syrian Refugees: Overview

In 2016, 11.6 per cent of all new immigrants admitted to Canada were refugees, a figure that represents the highest number the country has admitted⁴⁶ “since 1978, when the *Immigration Act* came into effect.”⁴⁷ Canada is also a signatory of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), which stresses amongst other things that “the Contracting States shall as far as possible facilitate the assimilation [integration] and naturalization of [domestic asylum] refugees.”⁴⁸ In principle, resettlement programs allow “host countries” to provide refugees with protection against refoulement,⁴⁹ and

“with access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights similar to these enjoyed by nationals as well as the opportunity to become a citizen in accordance with national laws.”⁵⁰

In Canada, the majority of resettled refugees, including Syrian refugees who have been processed overseas, are granted permanent resident status upon arrival,⁵¹ which other Western resettlement countries have not offered them.⁵² In fact, Canada’s immigrants and refugees resettled from abroad have traditionally been viewed as “citizens-in-waiting,” as they are entitled to apply for citizenship status after three years of permanent residence.⁵³ Hence they enjoy most of the rights and social benefits that citizens have, as well as the protection afforded under Canadian law, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,⁵⁴ which declares that “every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination.”⁵⁵

Here, it is also worth underscoring that with the passage and implementation of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2001) (IRPA), the government has, in its resettlement initiatives, shifted its focus to those most in need of protection.⁵⁶ In the context of group processing, the current legislation emphasizes the refugees’ protection needs and their levels of vulnerability over their ability to establish themselves in Canada,⁵⁷ and removes, in considering the most vulnerable cases, restrictions on “admissibility” criteria based on medical, economic, educational, and language proficiency that are usually applied to economic immigrants.⁵⁸ These considerations have also been applied vis-à-vis the selection of Syrian refugees: chosen from a pool of referrals by the UNHCR because they are amongst the most vulnerable and hence in need of protection, GARS constituted more than half of all Canada resettled Syrian refugees by early 2017.⁵⁹

Upon their arrival in Canada, resettled refugees, including the Syrians arriving in 2015, have enjoyed financial assistance for up to one year or until they are able to support themselves (whichever happens first).⁶⁰ Through programs such as the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), IRCC has provided recently arrived eligible refugees, primarily GARS, with both immediate and essential services and income support.⁶¹ The federal government has also worked with many federal and provincial partners to help refugees adjust to their new society. This has also been the case in the federal government’s Syrian refugees’ resettlement initiative, during which the government expanded the current network of Canadian communities that can support the resettlement effort,⁶² as a way of helping individuals and families adjust to their new society and foster integration. Implemented activities included port of entry services, assistance with temporary accommodations, orientation sessions,

enrolment in English- or French-language courses, links to settlement programming as well as mandatory federal and provincial programs in health, education, employment, etc.⁶³

Citizenship, Integration, and Civic Education for Immigrants and Resettled Refugees

In Canada, permanent residency affords migrants and refugees resettled from abroad a reasonably secure road to becoming citizens. Upon gaining citizenship, they “have rights and privileges accorded or protected by the state, as well as duties toward the state.”⁶⁴ Ever since multiculturalism has become an official Canadian policy, efforts to inculcate an attachment to Canada amongst newly arrived immigrants and refugees, and to encourage them to become active citizens—ones who enjoy both the opportunity and capacity to participate in the political and social life of their new home country and their own immediate communities—were adopted.⁶⁵

For many Canadians, good citizenship is a key reflection of “good integration.” According to a survey conducted in 2011, 50 per cent of all Canadians interviewed identified active participation in the local community and sharing common values or volunteering as key attributes of good citizenship.⁶⁶ For youth and children, this takes place primarily through civic education at the school and university levels, while for adult immigrants and refugees it takes place by exposing them to civic education concepts that make their way into federal and provincial government-supported English- and French-language training programs. In this regard, GARS and PSRS, amongst others can enrol in the same language courses that all newly arrived permanent residents have access to.⁶⁷

On the face of it, Canada’s emphasis on the integration of newcomers, including refugees, is driven by several factors. The first is that it is a country that relies strongly on immigration: by 2017, more than one in every five Canadians (21.9 per cent) was foreign born.⁶⁸ The second is that its immigration model is about permanent settlement. Consequently, its legal system, public policy, and political structures all encourage integration.⁶⁹ Article 3(e) of the IRPA, for example, underscores as some of its key objectives the need “to promote the successful integration of permanent residents into Canada, while recognizing that integration involves mutual obligations for new immigrants and Canadian society.”⁷⁰ Third, multiculturalism is an official policy and a tenet of Canadian constitutional law. Enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982,⁷¹ the policy expanded in 1988 when the Multiculturalism Act became federal law.⁷² As Meer and Moddod have underscored, in the political orientation of multicultural citizenship, this sought to rebalance “the politics of accommodation and inclusion

focused on ethno-religious groups, with a greater emphasis on hyphenated and plural forms of national citizenship, plural identities and individual rights.”⁷³

Some scholars have identified multiculturalism as a key factor driving successful citizenship integration.⁷⁴ Supporters of the proposition that multiculturalism is “doing well” in Canada point out that it is premised on the goals of fostering a society that recognizes and reflects a diversity of cultures; promotes active civic participation amongst its people; and ensures that people of all origins receive fair and equitable treatment.⁷⁵ To foster a sense of citizenship and strengthen the social integration of newly arrived immigrants and refugees, federal and provincial governments have supported or implemented activities that seek to promote refugees’ active civic participation in the political and civil life of their new home country and “inculcating a sense of the rights and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship and the value of diversity.”⁷⁶

Given that citizenship education has considered literacy to constitute “an essential element of citizenship participation and voluntarism,”⁷⁷ it is hardly surprising that federal and provincial authorities have viewed language classes targeting newcomers as a crucial medium for transmitting citizenship education-related concepts. In 1992, new English- and French-language instructions for newcomers (LINC) were developed and were fully funded by the federal government and implemented across Canada (except for Quebec, Manitoba, and British Columbia, which have their own provincially run language programs)⁷⁸ as a way of contributing to the social, cultural, and economic integration of immigrants and refugees into Canada.⁷⁹ Language courses were also geared towards improving students’ knowledge of Canada and of Canadian civics, and towards providing them with information on the Canadian workplace, job-search techniques, and tools amongst others.⁸⁰

At the same time, it is worth emphasizing that the educational policy formulations, programming, and structures, including civic education curricula, essentially remain a provincial responsibility.⁸¹ Thus, the federal government’s influence is limited to equalization subsidies and facilitating bilingual and multicultural programs.⁸² On the provincial level, civic education classes are provided in schools to youth and children.⁸³ There have also been initiatives by the non-profit sector and various immigrant-serving organizations to foster social, civic, and political engagement and immigrant integration. And while some receive funding from the IRCC, others have no regular sources of funding.⁸⁴

In addition, federal government authorities have funded the development of resources to help instructors teach citizenship-related concepts as part of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs,⁸⁵ which are offered by school boards, community colleges, and universities, as well

as government and the private sector.⁸⁶ Another federal initiative has been the Welcoming Communities Initiative (wci), which seeks to help newly arrived immigrants deal with racism and discrimination and raises awareness of the receiving communities about these issues.⁸⁷ Since 2010, the federal government has funded initiatives to undertake multiculturalism projects and events geared towards improving the responsiveness of institutions to the needs of diverse populations,⁸⁸ and promoting the civic engagement of minorities.⁸⁹

Other activities and products geared specifically towards newcomers include study materials for the citizenship test, citizenship ceremonies, and outreach activities.⁹⁰ This is because citizenship applicants are required to pass a written multiple-choice citizenship test examining their understanding of Canada and rights and responsibilities of citizenship, as well as the level of their command of English or French.⁹¹ Citizenship guides that have been developed in the past by the federal government have addressed topics such as volunteerism, multiculturalism, human rights, and individual responsibility with fellow citizens.⁹² Through an assessment of immigrants’ acquisition of language and the demonstration of their alignment with “Canadian values,” the emphasis has been on the newcomer’s capacity to participate in mainstream society.⁹³ Today, applicants are strongly encouraged to consult *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, on which the test-related questions are based.⁹⁴

Critics of Canada’s multiculturalism policy, on the other hand, underscore that its implementation has not been unproblematic. The fact that it is embedded within a bilingual framework has meant that multiculturalism became “a process of political bargaining among the two ‘founding nations’ of English and French and the more established immigrant communities of European origin ... without the political participation of the overwhelmingly visible minority immigrant arrivals of the past two decades.”⁹⁵ In addition, the policy has been deemed unsuccessful in transforming power relations, or dealing with the reality of systematic racism, social exclusion, and discrimination, all of which continue to pose serious challenges.⁹⁶ Furthermore, it has been argued that securitization stemming from the post-9/11 policy responses has disproportionately targeted minorities in Canada still remains central in the articulation of Canadian citizenship.⁹⁷ Moreover, scholars who have analyzed the current discourses of diversity in Canadian citizenship education have underscored that opportunities for advocating liberal social justice discourses risk being overtaken by neo-liberal and conservative narratives—ones that promote social cohesion while projecting a narrow vision of Canadian identity and asserting the role of the state.⁹⁸ Given that the objective is to integrate students of civic education

courses into the dominant society, “within this framework, inequities become constructed as individual issues, distracting attention from how power is embedded within social structures.”⁹⁹ This, they argue, has de-emphasized the liberal justice discourse and progressive ideals that engage with differences, and reinforce the importance of the state committing to social action policies and nurturing the individual’s right to his/her own identity.¹⁰⁰

Language Courses for Resettled Syrian Adult Refugees: Challenges and Prospects

For resettled adult refugees, including Syrians, in Canada, the ability to participate effectively in society is hampered by limited knowledge of the functioning of the community and government, and inadequate skills and understanding of how to manoeuvre integration-related challenges.¹⁰¹ This is not to suggest that refugees are not resourceful or resilient. Rather, it is to underscore that more needs to be done to increase the agency that the resettled refugee enjoys from the onset, rather than during subsequent stages of the resettlement experience further down the line.

A number of elements have made their resettlement and integration experience particularly challenging. By the time they have arrived in Canada, most have gone through precarious pre-resettlement experiences, including forced displacement, exposure to violence, protracted social and economic difficulties, and psychological trauma.¹⁰² A government-led evaluation of the Syria Initiative indicated that Syrian GARS, who by January 2017 constituted an estimated 54.5 per cent of all Syrian refugees who have been resettled across the country, carried higher education needs, health concerns, trauma, physical disabilities, challenging family compositions, lengthy refugee histories, and limited resilience and coping skills.¹⁰³ Coming from a war-torn country, many refugees grapple with fragile emotional conditions, which have made it difficult for them to integrate into their new surroundings. In addition, they often have escaped political regimes that have not only failed to protect their rights, but have frequently been involved in the systematic violation of these rights. Often, they have had limited exposure to what it means to be an “active citizen” in their country of origin.¹⁰⁴

As they become Canadian permanent residents, new uncertainties have coloured their lives.¹⁰⁵ They struggle with an unfamiliar community and political decision-making. Many find it difficult to participate in their new societies.¹⁰⁶ Past studies examining the engagement of diverse groups, including refugees, in the political life of Canadian society have produced mixed results. While some indicate that with time the level of formal and informal political participation of immigrants tends to be similar to that of Canadian-born individuals,¹⁰⁷ others have underscored that the political

incorporation and social and civic engagement of immigrants, particularly that of newly arrived immigrants, pose significant challenges. Language barriers, discrimination, lack of social relations and interactions, racism, and lack of knowledge of the Canadian political system represent elements that have hampered the ability of migrants to interact with the political system, including for those who have been living here for a decade or more.¹⁰⁸ Many newcomers, including refugees, do not know their rights—a fact that exacerbates their isolation, renders them vulnerable to exploitation, and results in overall low levels of civic engagement.¹⁰⁹

Given these hurdles and contextual challenges, the extent to which the exposure by Syrian adult refugees to civic education concepts appears to have enhanced their integration remains unclear and merits further investigation. One reason is that in stark contrast to youth and child migrants and refugees, adult refugees are not obliged to enrol in an educational institution upon arrival in Canada. As a result, their knowledge of what it means to be Canadian, including their rights and responsibilities as citizens, trickles down through limited venues: language classes or their own individual efforts to participate in the political and civic life of their local communities.¹¹⁰ In addition, most resettled Syrian refugees suffer from high levels of vulnerabilities and lower education levels and have attained lower levels of proficiency in the official languages (French or English) than previously resettled refugee cohorts arriving in Canada. According to government figures, 83 per cent of all GARS who were resettled between November 2015 and March 2016 and who had participated in the survey spoke neither English nor French.¹¹¹ And 81 per cent reported that they had attained a secondary-level education or less.¹¹²

Even where such activities have been offered, the inclusion of and reference to citizenship-related concepts, including civics, have lacked uniformity or have featured as indirect side-learning objectives of integration programs for newcomers more generally. A few examples illustrate this trend. In 2005, a study surveyed the extent to which teachers and program coordinators of eighty-five Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs based in Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta offered for adult newcomers, had incorporated citizenship concepts into their classrooms. Most of those surveyed expressed the view that these courses were by no means a substitute for citizenship-preparation courses.¹¹³ In addition, two main challenges were identified: the lack of a set curriculum and the low linguistic proficiency of students.¹¹⁴

In a similar vein, a federal government-led evaluation of the LINC program in 2010 concluded that although more than 90 and 80 per cent of LINC classes taught English for daily life and civics respectively,¹¹⁵ the lack of a mandated

curriculum made it “almost impossible to create validated instruments to assess what has been learned in LINC classes beyond proficiency in English.”¹¹⁶ In other words, it proved challenging to assess “the extent to which LINC participants acquired knowledge of Canada and of Canadian civics and the degree to which the program has assisted with settling in Canada.”¹¹⁷ Another concern that was expressed about current adult immigration language policies more generally is their emphasis on employability, and their failure to integrate differences and diversity into language education.¹¹⁸

One other evaluation worth mentioning is the one conducted in 2012 by IRCC of its multiculturalism program. Although it highlighted that related projects were having a positive impact on increased civic memory and pride, respect for core democratic values, and intercultural/ interfaith understanding,¹¹⁹ it also acknowledged that there was “limited evidence to demonstrate to what extent the Multiculturalism Program is achieving its expected outcomes.”¹²⁰ Moreover, it was not clear to what extent civic-related concepts that were promoted through this program had contributed to the newcomers’ civic/citizenship participation. One case in point is the Welcoming Communities Initiative: while its design had allowed communities across the country to tailor projects to the needs of newly arrived immigrants and has had a positive impact on newcomers, it has similarly been difficult to apply any standardized performance indicators to assess the more concrete impact of these projects.¹²¹

Similar results emerged in citizenship awareness activities. An IRCC-led evaluation conducted in 2013 to assess the relevance of these activities to promoting the value of Canadian citizenship found that the “emphasis is being shifted from promotional activities to processing [of citizenship applications] activities.”¹²² Moreover, it concluded that using the study guide *Discover Canada* as a key promotional tool required “a higher level of language proficiency, which may limit its accessibility to some vulnerable groups.”¹²³ In other words, the guide may be less accessible to those with lower levels of education and official language abilities.¹²⁴ In contrast to countries like the United States and Australia, the Canadian citizenship guide is not provided in any non-official languages or in plain language. It has also been criticized for having “a rather minimalist conception of citizenship.”¹²⁵ Furthermore, and following the adoption of the written citizenship test, many citizenship programs on the national level have been cut back or shortened.¹²⁶ Finally, the acquisition of formal citizenship in Canada comes at the end of the naturalization process. This signifies that the standardized citizenship test, and with it any exposure to citizenship education that it may grant to immigrants and refugees taking the exam, would at the earliest take place three years following their arrival in Canada.¹²⁷

Formal Citizenship Education for Adult Syrian Refugees in Arabic: A New Link in the Chain?

On one hand, there is no specific legal obligation upon states to provide citizenship education courses for adult refugees. However, Canada can find support in domestic legislation and policies. The adoption of multiculturalism as an official state policy has, normatively speaking, signalled the passage from assimilation to normative pluralism,¹²⁸ as subsequently underscored by the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. Within this framework, enhanced civic participation¹²⁹ has been re-affirmed as a key objective.¹³⁰ Article 3(1)(c) of this act emphasizes that, amongst other things, it is Canada’s policy to “promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation.”¹³¹ With eight out of its nine principles dealing with equity, the change in the interpretation of multiculturalism, from one that recognizes diversity to one that emphasizes the full and equitable participation of all Canadians, is an important one.¹³² It has also been reiterated by article 3(b) of IRPA, which proclaims that it seeks, amongst other objectives, “to enrich and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of Canadian society, while respecting the federal, bilingual and multicultural character of Canada,”¹³³ including by “support[ing] and assist[ing] the development of minority official languages communities in Canada.”¹³⁴

In terms of international human rights instruments, article 6(b) of the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights emphasizes that the steps taken by state parties to recognize the right of everyone to enjoy an opportunity to gain his or her living by work, “shall include technical and vocational guidance and training programmes, policies and techniques to achieve steady economic, social and cultural development.”¹³⁵ In addition, they must ensure that the right of everyone to education “shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms ... [and] shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups.”¹³⁶

It can also find support in international soft law such as UN General Assembly declarations and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommendations on human rights education and training more generally, and “may be considered to impart on behalf of the organ adopting it, a strong expectation that Members of the international community will abide by it.”¹³⁷ According to UNESCO, adult education strives formally and informally to ensure that “that all adults participate in their societies

... and [that they] develop and enrich their capabilities for living and working, both in their own interests and those of their communities, organisations and societies.”¹³⁸ Adult learning and education also play a crucial role in contributing to various objectives, including active citizenship, by allowing people to engage with social issues (such as justice, equity, and exclusion) and to “lead a decent life ... in all other ways that contribute to personal development and dignity.”¹³⁹ Moreover, it equips people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realize their rights, develops their capacity of thinking both critically and independently, fosters their resilience, and allows them to fully participate in development.¹⁴⁰ Finally, article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscores that all human beings are “equal in dignity and in rights,”¹⁴¹ a principle that should affect the way in which specific human rights are interpreted and applied by member states of the UN.¹⁴² Any state-led initiative that promotes this emphasis is a welcome development.

The proposal to develop and conduct civic education courses in Arabic, jointly with members of the resettled Syrian community, is driven by the concern that if government authorities were to wait until this cohort of resettled refugees attains proficiency in French or English before engaging with them on Canadian civic concepts, the delay will result in the loss of a valuable and time-sensitive window of opportunity to help them unpack these concepts. This risk is real, given that IRCC funded seats for lower-level language classes are not readily available and there are long waiting lists for language classes more generally.¹⁴³ Hence, waiting till they have attained improved English- and French-language skills risks putting them at a disadvantage in their resettlement and integration experience and is at odds with the declared policy of multiculturalism.

For many GARS, their low proficiency levels compared to those of other newcomers to Canada has meant that they have had to wait to attain a basic knowledge of one of the official languages before accessing the job market.¹⁴⁴ In fact, 54 per cent of the Syrian GARS participating in one federal government-led survey stated that they were not searching for employment, citing their enrolment in language classes as a primary reason.¹⁴⁵ At the time of the survey, only 27 per cent of the participating GARS had been referred to employment-related services and only 10 per cent had found employment.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, while federal and provincial service-providers have sought to tackle the immediate needs arising from resettlement (health, children’s school enrolment, language, and housing),¹⁴⁷ the financial assistance has generally not extended beyond the one-year mark. In light of the above, the forecast is that there will be “a marked increase in the proportion of GARS who would be expected to have integration challenges due to lack of knowledge of

an official language, limited education and age.”¹⁴⁸ There has also been a real fear of the risk of their assimilation into poverty,¹⁴⁹ particularly strong for Syrian GARS, 74 per cent of whom were more likely to have accessed food banks, compared to 23 per cent of Syrian PSRS.¹⁵⁰

The limited French and English proficiency skills at the time of resettlement have created obstacles for refugees at other levels as well. Not only are their abilities to engage in social interactions limited by the language barrier, the fact that most of them are GARS signifies that they do not necessarily have access to social or family ties, which renders them more socially isolated. Coupled with the precariousness of their refugee experience prior to arrival, their efforts to access the job market rapidly and efficiently are also affected, because proficiency in French and English remain a strong predictor of labour market success and educational attainment.¹⁵¹ This overlaps with the conclusions by Adamuti-Trache that the economic and social integration outcomes, as well as immigrant perceptions of settlement, are still controlled largely by pre-migration language skills, rather than by skills reported four years after arrival.¹⁵² Similarly, the ability to obtain recognition for their academic and professional credentials that they have earned in their home country or elsewhere continues to pose a significant challenge for refugees.¹⁵³

Concluding Remarks

With the situation of recently resettled Syrian refugees as a case study, this article has sought to underscore how language courses by federal and provincial authorities have fallen short of providing resettled Syrian adult refugees with meaningful opportunities to engage with and understand Canadian civic concepts, as a way of empowering them to better integrate into Canadian society. One identified shortcoming is that these programs are geared towards addressing refugees’ lack of linguistic “competence,” rather than towards the need of dealing with structural constraints in the system, in a way that nurtures Syrian refugees’ group consciousness and awareness of political and civic processes and structures. A civic education course in Arabic would ensure that this consciousness is harnessed, irrespective of individuals’ command of the official languages of Canada.

Subsequently, the article sought to demonstrate why government programming would benefit from supporting the development and implementation of a Canadian citizenship education course for recently resettled adult refugees in their native language. Skeptics would argue that one major hurdle to overcome is the fact that Canada’s multiculturalism policy remains strongly embedded in a bilingual framework (despite all the criticism that this has attracted). Hence, there is a fear that if the federal government were to support the

development and implementation of Canadian civic education courses in the native language of newly resettled refugees, this may subdue their enthusiasm for learning Canada's two official languages, as a way of fast-tracking their integration into the society of their new home country.

However, the fact that Canada has adopted a multiculturalism policy presents an imperative argument in favour of overcoming this hurdle, both on the level of policy formulation and mindset. This is because multiculturalism accords a high value to the promotion of equality of opportunity, recognition of "differences," and the interaction between ethno-religious groups and individual rights in a way that seeks to ensure that individuals and groups are treated as bearers of rights and that they enjoy horizontal and vertical relations to the state.¹⁵⁴ Given the government's commitment to multiculturalism, it is worth exploring whether the gap between policy and practice can be bridged through the development of Canadian civic education courses (in this case, in Arabic). However, more research is needed to establish the extent to which resettled Syrian refugees have been exposed to Canadian civic education concepts through government-funded language courses that they are enrolled in, or have enrolled in since their arrival, and whether or not they believe that their integration experience and their own empowerment can be further improved through provision of a compulsory Canadian citizenship course in their native language. It would also be important to ascertain whether or not there is support amongst the target group for enrolling in such a course, irrespective of the individuals' initial English- and French-language proficiency, given the lack of a systematic content of civic education in current English- or French-language courses.

If Canadian citizenship courses in Arabic were to be developed, there is also a pressing need for government-led civic education programs to better understand refugees' forced migration experience and the educational gaps and challenges that they face in the post-resettlement stage.¹⁵⁵ This is because Syrian refugees were admitted to Canada on humanitarian grounds and for protection needs, and not on economic grounds, as is the case of skilled worker immigrants.¹⁵⁶ Thus, with the exception of Syrians who were privately sponsored by extended family members or average concerned Canadian citizens, the majority of resettled Syrians have enjoyed very little agency in choosing Canada as the place of their resettlements.¹⁵⁷

Canada's resettlement of these refugees has been hailed by the international community and by the UNHCR as a model that should be replicated elsewhere. In response to the 2017 fall reports of the auditor general of Canada, which had audited the Syrian Refugee Initiative, Canada's Minister of IRCC Ahmed Hussen reiterated "the importance

of integration in building a strong society [and that] [t]his means that we need to support the full participation of newcomers in the economic, social, cultural, and civic life of Canada."¹⁵⁸ However it is clear that more can and must be done throughout all phases of the resettlement process. Furthermore, in light of Canada's commitment to multiculturalism, the emphasis of this policy on equitable participation must guide more thoroughly the actions of government authorities to ensure that they adopt a more justice-oriented approach to citizenship education. In short, what is needed is a policy shift in the way that language courses and their civic education content are developed and administered, so that refugees are no longer considered policy objects but active integral agents in their own resettlement.¹⁵⁹ This will enable them to "receive a fair return on their human capital assets and thereby contribute as early and fully as possible to their communities."¹⁶⁰ It would also allow Canada to translate its commitment to multiculturalism and "burden sharing" in a more effective manner, long after the initial resettlement phase of refugees has taken place.¹⁶¹

NOTES

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- 161 Research and fieldwork for this article was conducted by the author in her capacity as a postdoctoral Steinberg fellow in International Migration Law and Policy, Faculty of Law, McGill University, from 2017 to 2018. Since this article has been written, she has become aware that the Centre Culturel Quebeco-Syrien in Quebec has been holding sessions in Arabic to prepare immigrants for their Canadian

citizenship exam. The author is not affiliated, professionally or personally, with the centre, did not have any engagement with it in the past, and cannot attest to the quality or content of these sessions. There may be similar initiatives in Quebec or elsewhere across Canada.

Rouba Al-Salem is an independent migration researcher. The views expressed in this article are her personal views and do not reflect those of her current or past professional or academic affiliations.