



Queens of Syria

Classroom resource

Lesson Plan

Background information for teachers

According to figures from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the conflict in Syria has forced almost 5 million people to leave their homes and seek refuge in other countries. The majority of these are women and children who are living in neighbouring countries with little prospect of returning to their homeland in the near future.

In 2013, Refuge Productions brought together sixty Syrian refugee women living in Jordan to adapt and perform Euripides' anti-war tragedy, *The Trojan Women*. They had never acted before and the extraordinary piece of theatre they produced weaves their own stories of life as refugees and their experiences of war and loss with the ancient Greek text. In July 2016, with the support of the UK charity, Developing Artists, the women came to the UK to perform their play in theatres across the country. This was a life-changing opportunity for the refugees themselves,

Curriculum links: English, Drama, Personal, Social and Health Education, Citizenship

Core skills: Citizenship, Collaboration and communication, Student leadership and personal development

and an eye-opening experience for British audiences who had an opportunity to hear first-hand the realities of life as a refugee.

These lesson plans provide examples of resources and activities to help your pupils to learn about this innovative project, develop their knowledge and understanding of the situation in the Syria and its surrounding countries and the realities of life for millions of people as refugees.



Activities

Read the following accounts written by two performers from the play about why they left their homes in Syria and their perilous journeys to Amman in Jordan, where they and their families are now living as refugees. Older pupils might also watch the short film of Maha talking about her escape from Syria <https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/classroom-resources/list/queens-syria/media> (Maha's journey).

Mrs. Al S: 'We first left our neighbourhood because of one of the close by attacks that hit the city of *Al Sayyeda Zainab in the southern suburbs of Damascus* and moved around in Syria until we eventually fled to Jordan two and a half years ago. I realised we had to leave Syria the moment the army attacked our area and there were around 30 tanks outside on the streets. No one was able to leave their house for four days straight and all houses were searched. That was the time we told ourselves that this place is no longer safe for us to stay and so we fled to Jordan'.

'I remember the day we left Syria, my husband told me that he planned with a driver to come pick us up. I was so upset and I cried because I did not want to leave. I had to pack all our belongings and get ready with tears running down my cheeks. All my sisters came over to say their goodbyes too. The next morning we left and we all cried throughout the drive until we reached the border. Crossing the border was hard on us too. We left Syria legally with our passports, but the procedure to let you into Jordan takes a long time until they agree whether or not to let you in. we waited for 10 hours until we were given the green light to cross over to Jordan'.

My children took a long time to adapt. I remember when we first moved here my son *Omar* used to miss and crave the bread in Syria and did not like the bread in Jordan'.

My son has always been aloof and isolated himself from everyone. In Syria, however, he was used to the atmosphere and was able to go to the shops and play with cousins and basically interact with the world even if it were on a small level. Once he came to Jordan he became a lot more isolated and alone. I really suffered with him and I started to beg him to get out of the house for just half an hour. He would not, he hated school and he hated talking to everyone. All he did was stay home and stare at the TV. After he began being

involved in a drama project, I noticed how his personality changed for the better. *Omar* is very quiet and an introvert, but once he joined the play I started to notice that he is talking, smiling and socialising more.

My youngest daughter *Leila* suffered too in Jordan. *Leila* turned into an introvert once we got here and did not speak much. When she started school I soon noticed that she became very angry and aggressive with the other students. She started to be aggressive with her siblings too at home. She was always stuck to me and could not sleep anywhere but by me. I eventually took her to the Centre for Victims of **Torture (CVT) program**. The program helped change her mental state immensely'.

Mrs. M used to own a pharmacy and worked as a pharmacist in Syria.

She has four children. Three daughters *Amina*, *Maya* and *Sara* and one new born baby boy his name is *Yousef*. *Mrs. M* was financially stable in Syria with an excellent job that paid the bills and more. The family is from Damascus. Soon after the war started and despite the area being safer than many others and a little less affected, they still heard bomb shelling and explosions.

Her older sister *Amina* and youngest *Sara* did not get as affected by the war as the middle one *Maya*. *Maya* really suffered from war; every time she heard the shelling her face would turn yellow, vomit and shake in fear almost to faint. Once she moved to Jordan, every time she heard honking cars, fireworks or any loud noise she would have the same side effects of faint, yellow face and vomiting. The side effects started wearing off in a span of two years, the time she has spent in Jordan.

The situation in Syria was worsening and the three girls missed two months of school. The mother was also pregnant at the time. It was at this point when the parents moved to Jordan to start a new life as Syrian refugees hoping to have a safe haven for their children. The mother eventually gave birth to *Yousef* in Jordan.

Unfortunately due to refugee laws both parents were unable to continue work in their field.



Questions to discuss with your pupils:

- Why are so many people currently leaving their homelands across the world to migrate to other countries? What dangers might they face on their journeys?
- Talk about what it must be like to have to leave your home and friends in times of conflict and move to a new country. Do you know of someone who has had to leave their homeland either in the past or present?
- Why are some people hostile to refugees coming to live in Europe?
- How can we welcome and help people to settle into our schools and communities?

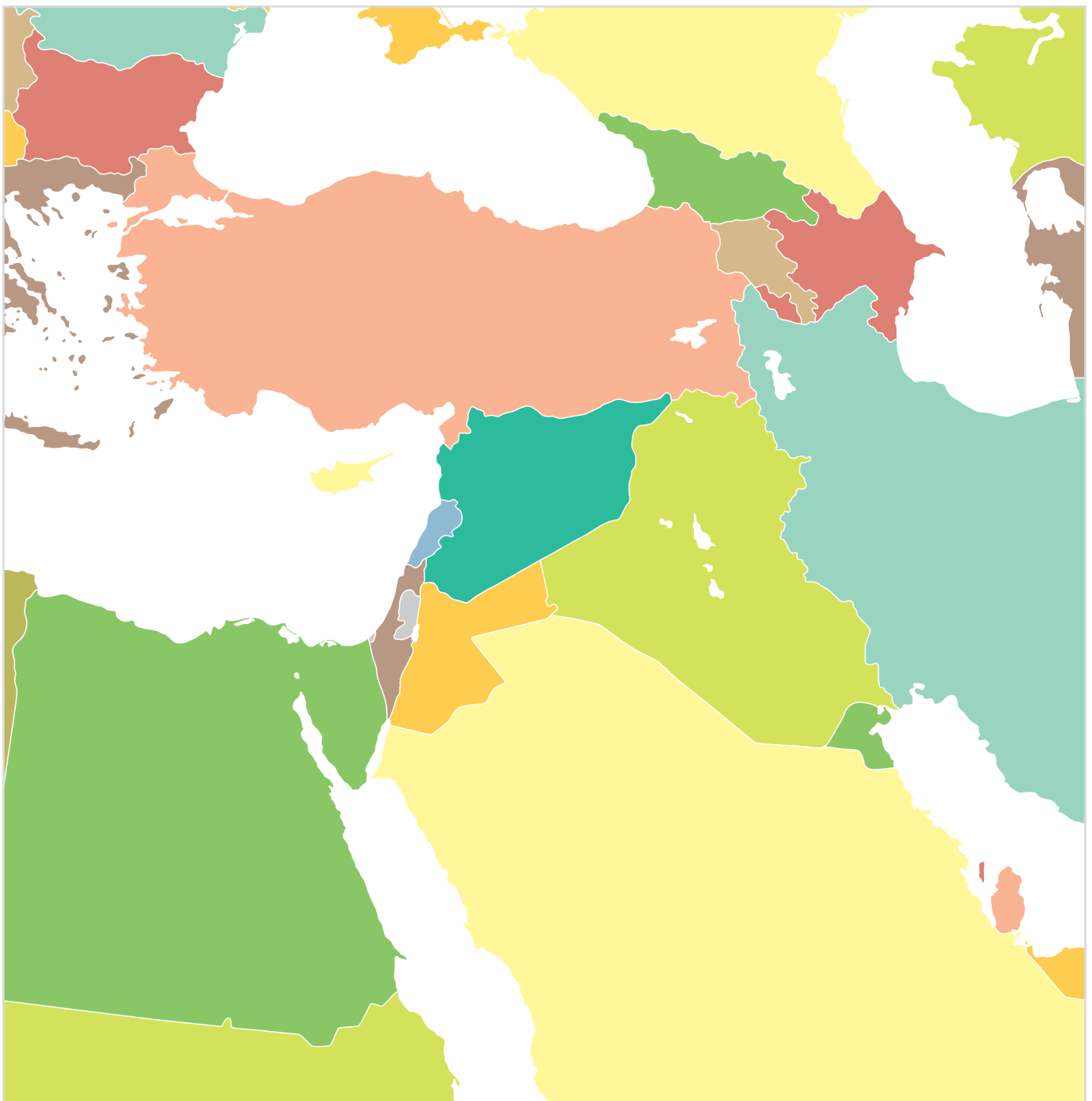
Remember that these may be very sensitive issues for some of the members of your class.

Help your pupils to locate Syria and its neighbouring countries using atlases, globes or mapping software. Ask what they know about the current situation in this part of the world and discuss some of the latest news stories about migration and refugees, using newspapers and trusted sources on the Internet. It would be advisable to check these first to ensure the content is appropriate for your pupils. Examples can be found in the **Find Out More** section at the back of the pack

Photocopy the map on **Activity sheet 1** and ask your pupils to label Syria and its neighbouring countries and the Mediterranean Sea and show the journey taken by one of the families.

Activity sheet 1 – Map of Syria and neighbouring countries

- Label the countries of Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, the cities of Damascus and Amman and the Mediterranean Sea on the map..
- Show one of family's journeys from Damascus to Amman. Approximately how far did they travel? If you had to travel the same distance from your home where might you reach?



What things do you think would be essential to take on a long journey like this? The following British Council activity from the *Living Together Refugee Pack* could help your pupils to explore this issue further.

Ask the students to work in small groups. Give each group a copy of the cards on **Activity sheet 2**. Ask them to cut them up and lay them out on the table. Tell each group that they are a family who have to leave their home country quickly and become refugees. They have been given only 10 minutes to gather up 10 things to take with them to their new host country. Before they are properly organised, ask each group to swap tables with another to represent the journey they have made, taking their 10 cards with them.

Once in their new 'home' tell them that circumstances have changed for the worse and they are now in a situation where they can only keep four of their items. Which ones will they choose? Ask the groups to discuss and then provide justifications for their choices. Display the chosen item cards or worksheets in a prominent place, where everyone can see them.

Compare the results of the groups.

- Are any of the chosen items common to all groups?
- Discuss with the students the impact that having your possessions taken away from you might have.

Activity sheet 2 – What would you take?

Family Photographs



Cooking pots



A year's supply of your favourite food



Something that your grandparents gave you



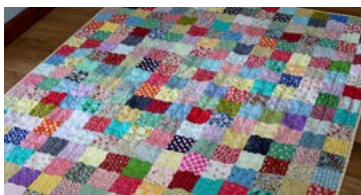
Your favourite books



A small amount of money



Blankets/quilts



Your passports and papers



Copy of your religious book



Bottled water



Precious objects

In times of conflict and separation when people are forced to leave their homes, even the most ordinary objects can become precious. The installation *Memoire(s) des Femmes* from the *Syria: Third Space* exhibition included recordings of testimonies from Syrian women who were forced to leave their homes, alongside photographs of some of the ordinary objects that hold significant and special memories for them about their homeland. They included the following:

Heart key ring

'This key ring, shaped like half a heart, was given to me by a friend. One day we were walking and then sat at a restaurant. We had an argument but then we made up, so we decided to buy something together. We bought this key ring. I took one half of the heart, and she took the other.'



Keys

'I still keep the keys to my house, because I know some day, I'll come back to visit.'



Listen to the short [audio clip](#) or read Reem's account of her feelings about leaving Syria.

I really didn't want to leave Syria at all. We only left after we'd moved at least six times inside Syria, but we found that there is no safe place for us. My father decided that we'd leave to Jordan. I was totally against him in the beginning, but now after a few years I think that he was totally right, and he was thinking about us and just thinking as a father, he was just thinking about us, about my brother, and now I'm so happy for my brother, because my brother was in the age of the military service, so if he had just gone to the army, he will be even a killer or a dead man, so now I feel, I feel that yes, thank God that we left Syria here to Jordan. But it also breaks my heart because yeah, it's not that easy a thing, because day after day you just feel that your home is far away from you.



Photographs of precious objects brought from Syria, from the Syria: Third Space Exhibition

Bring in an object that is precious to you concealed in a bag or box. Tell your pupils that they have ten questions to try and work out what the object is and why it is precious to you. You can only reply yes or no to their questions. Reveal your precious object to the class and explain its significance to you.

Encourage your pupils to talk with a partner about things that are precious to them. Where did the object come from, why is it special and how would they feel if they had to leave it behind? Ask them to write a creative description of their chosen object and why it is important to them. Remind them to use thoughtful choices of words and similes to produce a piece of writing that really creates a picture in words. You could display their writing alongside photographs of their objects, but be sensitive if some children do not wish to talk openly about their precious objects.

In 2014, the British artist Grayson Perry created a large brightly coloured tapestry called *Comfort Blanket*, inspired by a friend whose family had left Hungary during the Soviet invasion in 1956. He describes the tapestry as a portrait of Britain containing words, phrases and images of objects associated with 'Britishness.'

Ask each pair to suggest three objects or images to represent your cultural heritage. Share these with another pair and then gather the class together to share their thoughts and ideas that could be included in a giant artwork to represent your own cultural heritage.

Activity sheet 3



Watch the short films of the Syrian women talking about their change in circumstances and new lives in Jordan as their children arrive home from school. <https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/classroom-resources/list/queens-syria/media> (“exile” and “homework”)

Discuss what daily life was like for the families before the conflict started in comparison with their lives now. Why do you think being in the play has been so important for them?

Cast member Khaula said: ‘We came into a new society, a new way of life: we were isolated. Doing this play helped us break the ice; we started to connect with others and make friends. It gave us the courage we needed to talk about our problems frankly and clearly. We feel that we can do something for Syria, and the Syrian people, by sending a message to the whole world – hopefully someone can help us end this tragedy.’

In 1989, governments around the world promised all children the same rights by adopting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. These rights describe what a child needs to survive, grow, and live up to their potential in the world. They apply equally to every child, no matter who they are or where they come from. These include the right to:

- Life, survival and development
- Protection from violence, abuse or neglect
- An education that enables children to fulfil their potential
- Express their opinions and be listened to.

A report from *Save the Children* in May 2016 shows that at least 3.5 million refugee children around the world are currently out of school. Discuss why access to education is so important for the refugee children.

Ask your pupils to find out more about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and what rights they think all children should have. Pupils from Frances Olive Anderson Primary School discussed these with their partner school in Lebanon and then created an A to Z of children's rights with both schools illustrating an alternate letter. Encourage your class to create their own version working with another class or partner school if you have one.

Additional activity

Ask your pupils to find out who is their Member of Parliament and Member of the European Parliament. Perhaps they could contact them to find out what their opinions are on the issue of migrants and refugees? If your pupils disagree with their opinions, or feel strongly about this issue, they could write to them expressing their views.



Artwork from pupils at Frances Olive Anderson Primary School and Mohammad Shamel School, Beirut, Lebanon

Find Out More

Further information about the Queens of Syria project can be found at:

- Developing artists Queens of Syria project website - <http://test.developingartists.org.uk/our-projects/queens-of-syria-jordan>
- Guardian Article of the project - <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/20/queens-of-syria-refugees-trojan-women-adaptation-uk-tour>
- BBC Interview – Queens of Syria Documentary - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4yB2Cc6PJ2dXKb1NVkYh7Ty/queens-of-syria-how-50-women-made-award-winning-film>

Further resources and videos to use in lessons on the Syrian crisis can be found at:

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/16979186>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDy8_8L3s0A
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqMLmNqPuIQ>

To find other information and activities to help your pupils understand issues connected to migration and the reality of the lives of refugees around the world go to:

- Living Together Education Pack - [https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/sites/so/files/files/Living%20Together%20-%20Refugee%20Education%20Pack\(3\).pdf](https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/sites/so/files/files/Living%20Together%20-%20Refugee%20Education%20Pack(3).pdf)
- Primary Level Migration Teaching Resource - https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/sites/so/files/bc_pri_migrants_110615.pdf
- Secondary Level Migration Teaching Resource - https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/sites/so/files/bc_sec_migrants_110615.pdf

Resources to help you find out more about Arabic Language and Culture can be found at:

- <https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/classroom-resources/list/arabic-language-and-culture>

To find other activities for students related to the Syria: Third Space artwork go to:

- https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/sites/so/files/syria_third_space_teacher_resources_-_print.pdf

For further information about Euripides play Trojan Women play go to;

- <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/classical-play/archive/2013TrojanWomen-studyinfo>

This document shows the UN Rights of the Child in child friendly language:

- <http://www.unicef.org/rightsite/files/uncrcchildfriendlylanguage.pdf>

Fiction for young people about refugees from different times and places include:

- 'The Silver Sword' (1956) by Iain Serrailier set in Poland in World War Two
- Elizabeth Laird's book 'Oranges in No Man's Land' (Haymarket, 2008) which is set in Lebanon and focuses on a child's attempts to get treatment for her sick grandmother.

Credits

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