

Syrian families talk about their Canadian Christmas

The Fandis and the Al Shteiwes have been involved in Christmas activities

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Seeing Christmas for the first time in Canada is quite the adjustment for Syrian families in York Region.

As the holidays approach, Syrians reflect on what for many of them is their first experience of celebrating Christmas in North America, among a majority Christian population.

The Fandi family in Stouffville arrived in Canada early this year from Jordan after fleeing their home in Daraa, Syria. They've adjusted to life here, constantly praising the hospitality and kindness they've received from their neighbours.

But when it comes to holiday celebrations, they remember their old traditions.

"Christmas is good," said Faisal, the father of the family. "But I don't know much about it. We're Syrians, we're Muslims, so we're just used to Eid and Mawlid an-Nabi."

Muslims across the world, including those from Syria, traditionally have three major holidays in the year.

Eid al-Fitr (Festival of Breaking the Fast), which is celebrated at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. Eid al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) which commemorates Abraham's

sacrifice to God. And Mawlid an-Nabi (Birthday of the Prophet) which celebrates the birth anniversary of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad.

Islamic holidays follow the Islamic calendar, a lunar calendar that lags roughly 10 days behind the Gregorian calendar. As a result, each year holiday dates move backwards 10 days.

This year, one of the major holidays - Mawlid an-Nabi - landed on Sunday, Dec. 11, in and around the holiday season.

The Fandis celebrated as expected with family, friends and a feast. But that doesn't mean they're not doing anything for Christmas. Their sponsor group - Stouffville Cares - donated a Christmas tree, which they decorated and plan to surround with presents.

"I like the tree," Thær said. "We don't have Christmas trees in Syria."

On Christmas Day, the Fandis plan on spending time with friends and family, while their son Thær, 12, plays hockey.

"I want a hockey stick, a red and black one, because of the Stouffville Spirit, with white tape," Thær said when asked what he wanted for Christmas.

The Fandi children have been involved in Christmas activities in school, singing Christmas carols, baking cookies and having a Christmas pageant.

The children have their own "gift draw," said sponsor Jason Wilson.

"They're very excited, we did a little draw, Thær picked his siblings, they're going to buy one gift for each other," he said. "There have also been letters to Santa."

The Fandis reflect on

the stark difference they've noticed with Christmas celebrations in Canada versus Christmas celebrations in Syria and Jordan.

"In Jordan, our neighbours were Christian," Faisal said. "They just go to church and spend time with their family."

Santa Claus, however, does visit Christians in Jordan, they said.

Faisal noted that shopping was a much more emphasized aspect of Christmas in Canada, something he didn't expect.

In Bradford, just north of York Region, another Syrian family is excited about Canadian Christmas traditions.

The Al Shteiw family fled Homs, Syria, and arrived in Canada in January. Ali and his wife Manjiye have 10 children, with their last son being born in Canada.

The snow has been a particular joy for the children as they've spent most of the season building snowmen.

"If it snows a lot and we don't have to go to school, then we get to build a snowman and I love doing that," said Rachid, 8.

Just like the Fandi children, the Al Shteiw children have been actively involved in Christmas celebrations at school, helping with decorations and after-school crafts.

The Al Shteiwes had a smaller celebration of Christmas back in Syria, often with their Christian friends.

"We would gather with others and eat together, give gifts and celebrate the new year," said Mohammed, 18.

"But in Canada, everything is more beautiful.



Metroland

The Fandi family were given a Christmas tree by their sponsor group, Stouffville Cares. They plan to exchange gifts on Christmas Day as part of their first celebration in Canada.

The streets look really nice and we like walking around instead of driving," he added.

The family has decorated their home with lights on the outside and crafts on the inside. They recently participated in Vaughan's

Santa Claus parade, riding in a float with a handmade Syrian flag, held beside the flag of their new home, Canada.

Christians in Syria make up 10 per cent of the population, but the civil war has forced many to

flee. Regardless of religious beliefs, the conflict has uprooted many families. Muslim or Christian - the holidays are a time when families come together to celebrate, both the Fandis and the Al Shteiwes believe.

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