

# **No Time to Be a Child: Escaping Syria, Surviving Turkey, and Finding Home in America**

**by Lina Mohamad**

Although I'm only twenty-four, it sometimes feels like I've lived three lifetimes. I was born in Syria and I'm ethnically Kurdish—but we Kurds don't have a country to call our own. Most people know little about us. We've lived across Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, but we've never had a state of our own. History didn't leave space for us. After World War I, as colonial powers carved up the Middle East, promises of a Kurdish homeland were made—and then broken. New borders were drawn through our mountains, our villages, even our families.

We Kurds hold tight to our culture and carry deep pride in it. Our New Year, Newroz, falls on March 21st. It marks the beginning of spring, of renewal—and for us, of resistance. It's a celebration of light after darkness. As a child, I didn't understand the politics, but I felt the pride in my parents' eyes as we lit the fire and danced in circles, our hands clasped tightly, refusing to let go.

I was born in Afrin, a city in northern Syria, and spent most of my early childhood there. Those years were warm—filled with family, love, and a deep sense of belonging. I remember the smell of my uncle's village farm, the sound of laughter at weddings that lasted for days. We hiked into the mountains, visited cousins, and gathered for big meals. My siblings and I went to school, and life was rich with connection. We found joy in the simplest things.

When I was around eight or nine, my father—a well-educated man and a lawyer—moved us to Aleppo. My mother, a high school graduate, stayed home with us children: me and my younger brothers. I was the oldest, the big sister, and I remember the big city, and how much of an adjustment it was going to school there. But slowly I made friends and came to love Aleppo.

And then came 2011.

I was around eleven when everything changed. What began as protests against the Assad regime quickly turned into a civil war. Aleppo, where we lived, became a stronghold for the opposition—at first made up of everyday Syrians who wanted freedom and change. The government responded with bullets, prisons, and fear. As the fighting dragged on, more extreme groups began to appear, and the war became harder to understand. Suddenly, Aleppo was no longer home—it was a battleground. The economy collapsed. Food became scarce. Schools shut down. Friends disappeared. We stopped talking about the future. We just tried to survive each day.

I saw pictures and videos on social media—houses being bombed, all the family killed with blood on the ground. I saw women and men screaming in terror and in grief after losing everything. I heard people couldn't find jobs. It was hard to live—hard to eat, to drink, to do anything. Most people had to rely on help from their family or friends who were living in Europe or other countries. They would send money just so people could survive.

We moved back to Afrin because my parents believed we would be safer there. My father couldn't find work as a lawyer, so he took a professional office job, but it paid much less, and things were hard. Then my grandfather died, and life became even more difficult for us. That's when my father made the hardest decision of his life: to leave Syria. My mother sold her wedding ring. We borrowed money from my aunt. Everything we had—our entire savings—went into that escape. We paid families who lived near the border to guide us, showing us the safest roads and how to avoid the guards who would send us back without hesitation.

I packed a small backpack. We could take only the bare essentials. My mother carried a suitcase, but we left behind our home, our memories—our life as we knew it. We crossed the border into Turkey on foot, walking through the mountains, careful not to be seen. Then we had

to find a bus stop and make our way to Istanbul. I remember the cold, the silence, and the fear. My hands shook as I looked to my parents for some sign that we would be okay. But even they didn't know if we would make it.

Eventually, we reached Istanbul. Some family friends took us in. They gave us food and a place to sleep. The next morning, I woke up and realized they had daughters around my age—thirteen and fourteen. I was happy to meet them, and I hoped we could become friends, maybe even play together. But I was surprised to learn they didn't go to school. They worked in a textile factory to help support their family.

Not long after, our whole family began working in that same factory. It was the start of a new life—one defined by labor, not schoolbooks. I was twelve years old, working twelve to thirteen hours a day, folding clothes I'd never wear. I was still a child, but there was no time to be one. No time to play. No time for school. I worked, went home, slept—and did it all over again. I was exhausted all the time.

The factory was loud, with the constant whirl of machines that never stopped. The air was thick with dust and fabric fibers, and there was no air conditioning. In the summer, sweat pooled beneath our clothes within minutes of starting. In the winter, the heating barely worked, and we were often cold. The windows were sealed shut, and the sharp smell of fabric dye and oil hung heavy in the air. Fortunately, there were many other Kurds working in the factory. I began to learn Turkish so I could help my family communicate—so we could shop, ask questions, and do the basic things needed to survive.

I started out folding cloth and then over time, I wanted to ensure that I had a better paying position, so I learned how to use the sewing machines. The bosses saw that I was able to sew, so they gave me a job at a machine. We only got three breaks a day: fifteen minutes at 10 a.m., a

lunch break at 1 p.m. that lasted thirty minutes, and a final fifteen-minute break at 4 p.m. They brought in food, but there wasn't enough. At the end of the day, my fingers got calloused from cutting the threads. My back hurt. I was exhausted. And we worked five days a week—60 hours in total every week.

After a couple of years, my father began looking into refugee resettlement. He believed deeply that his children deserved an education. But in Turkey, we couldn't go to school—Syrian students weren't accepted unless they could pay high fees, and we simply couldn't afford it. So my father applied for us to be resettled in another country. We were told that after a year, we might be interviewed for a chance to move. We hoped for Germany, or somewhere in Europe. Instead, after a couple of years they said: “You're going to America.”

It didn't feel real. America was something we'd only seen on TV—a faraway dream. But it happened. We completed all the requirements: interviews, background checks, medical evaluations, cultural orientation classes, and endless paperwork. Then we boarded the plane. We arrived in the United States—and that's where another difficult chapter began.

We waited at the O'Hare airport for almost two hours. We didn't know the language. We didn't know the country. We were frightened. This wasn't something we were used to—in our culture, when someone arrives, you go to meet them. You don't leave them waiting. But we just sat there, unsure of what to do.

Finally, a woman from the resettlement agency showed up. She drove us to an apartment and left us with a few containers of takeout food. Before she walked out the door, she told us we could call her if we needed anything—but we didn't have a phone. As she left, she said she'd come back the next day.

She never came back.

We were there for over two weeks. No phone. No way to contact anyone. We didn't even know how to buy food. There was some flour in the cupboard, and my mother started making flatbread—just so we'd have something to eat. It felt like being lost all over again, only now in a country that didn't even know we existed, and in a language we couldn't speak. Then, one day, a neighbor sent their child to our door. They said they wanted to visit. They brought us food—and they contacted the agency that had left us there.

My father, desperate and exhausted, went to the organization's office. They didn't even realize we were here. The woman who had picked us up had taken a flight the next day and forgot to tell the agency we had arrived. Eventually, after my father's complaints and their embarrassment, things got better. They started helping. They enrolled my brothers and me in school. I was finally back in a classroom.

Before I became an American citizen, my uncle got sick and passed away. We all wanted desperately to go back to Afrin and visit with family and friends. We wanted to reconnect and to offer condolences to his wife and children. We could not. We only had green cards, and if we went back, they would arrest us and we would never be able to return to the United States. We made difficult decision to stay.

I went to high school in America, graduated, and even started college. I completed two semesters, but I couldn't afford it, and the financial aid didn't come through, even though I qualified for it. I had to work. I took jobs at JCPenney and at Walgreens. Then, Mohammed Altinawi at Trellus helped me get a job at Brooks Brothers in the mall. That was the first time I felt like I belonged somewhere again. I made friends. I became a supervisor. I stayed there five years.

Eventually, my hours at Brooks Brothers got cut, and I knew I needed something more stable. That's when Mohammed suggested I work at Trellus as a program assistant. Six months later, I was promoted to program coordinator. I've now been working there for over a year.

At the same time, I completed a certificate program through Calibre, a workforce program for immigrants. That experience made me feel empowered, like I wasn't just surviving anymore—I was building something.

Today, I work as a Career Services Navigator, helping others like me find their path. My parents still work hard—my father cleans in a factory store; my mother had to stop working due to her health. My brothers are here, too. We all live together. We're safe.

Sometimes I think about the little girl in Syria—the one who danced at weddings and dreamed of the future. She had no idea what was coming. But I carry her with me—her hope, her strength, her belief in light after darkness. Her belief in working hard, getting an education, and helping others. She is still part of who I am.

My name is Lina Mohamad. I am Kurdish. I am Syrian. I am American.

And I am still here.