

THE STORIES: MOHAMMAD



First name: **MOHAMMAD**

Last name: **SAFEEA**

Age: **29**

Country of origin: **SYRIA** (Palestinian origin)

Living in **Portugal** since: **2014**

SHORT SUMMARY

Mohammad Safeea, syrian of palestinian origin, mechanical engineer, 29 years old, escapes not to be incorporated into the army of Bashar-al-Assad and arrives in Portugal in 2014, after a visit to Algeria, where he failed to fulfill his dream of continuing to study. Completes the master's degree with 20 values, studies Portuguese and starts the PhD in collaborative robotics. He likes cod, fado and freedom. He is creating his own future and wants to be happy in Portugal.

“STUDY, WORK, RAISE A FAMILY, BE HAPPY AND LIVE IN PEACE”

CONFLICT

The war began and the first bombings took place in Damascus when Mohammad had just completed his mechanical engineering course. He was called to the army loyal to President Bashar al-Assad. As he did not agree with

Bashar al-Assad's policies and did not want to go to war, he decided to leave the country. Mohammad does not want to talk much about the conflict. He then interrupted his studies and said that his mother was very sad.

ESCAPE AND ARRIVAL IN PORTUGAL

Mohammad escaped from Damascus following his call to the army and went to Algeria. He went to meet an uncle who lived in Algiers.

He had some difficulties in going to Algeria, but as he escaped early in the war, visas were still relatively easy to obtain. He stayed there for two years, initially maintaining his intention to continue his studies, with a master's degree in his area. He got some work to do, but he said it was difficult to work. The jobs were all manual and low-paid.

He also had problems with the papers and regularization of his situation in the country. The idea of continuing his studies did not materialize. *“I could not continue studying”*, he said.

NEW BELONGINGS AND INCLUSION

Following on-line research, he applied for and obtained a scholarship through the platform created by former President of the Portuguese Republic Jorge Sampaio¹.

There was a new possibility of going to Portugal.

In the first attempt to reach Portugal by plane and despite having all the necessary documentation (according to his perspective), he was prevented from leaving for Europe at Algiers Airport. With the legal support of the platform, it was possible, through the embassies of Portugal and Palestine, to overcome the situation. He makes a special reference to Dr. Helena, platform technician - *“Without her I would*

You need to have frequent contact with the cultural and social life of the host society.

¹ <http://jorgesampaio.pt/jorgesampaio/pt/global-platform-4-syrian-students/>

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not be here. The whole process took a month. Finally he arrived by plane in Lisbon.

He stayed one day in Lisbon and then went to Coimbra on March 28th, 2014 to start his studies. The masters course had already begun. The lectures in the master was all in English, which facilitated the accompaniment of the academic work.

At the same time, he started a Portuguese course at the University, at the Faculty of Arts. He says that although English is the dominant language in the scientific community, where he is included, he felt a great need to learn the local language.

LIFE IN COIMBRA

With the learning of Portuguese, the integration process was strengthened. He began to participate in fado gatherings, go to music concerts and see plays. It also refers to the support given by a teacher of the faculty of letters, who often invited him to go to cultural meetings. He said that he felt few integration difficulties and had enough support from people and institutions. He lives in a student house, which is shared with Portuguese but also with Erasmus students from other countries. Made lots of friends around here, mainly companions in academic life.

PUBLIC FIGURE

He completed with a maximum grade (20 points) the master's degree in Mechanical Engineering, at the University of Coimbra, in 2016. He currently is doing his PhD and is already a "fundamental" piece in the robotics laboratory of the University of Coimbra.

Mohammad started to have a great public exposure through various

Portuguese media². Asked about the relevance of his example to breaking some prejudices towards refugees, he says:

"I'm not that famous (laughs), but maybe my example is important."

Example of a dedicated and competent student. One day he gave an interview to a television station and the other day, when he woke up, he had many messages on his cell phone asking for more interviews.

He is recognised in the street, in the supermarket, in the gym he attends. He says people did not know, or even imagine, that he was a refugee, much less a student. "Yes, perhaps, this may help to break people's prejudice toward refugees."

He says that people who live in Syria and elsewhere want the same thing as everyone else: *"Study, work, raise a family, be happy and live in peace."*

"People think that in Syria we live in the middle ages, that no one studies, that we have seven women! When I go out at night and they ask me where I am from and I say that I am from Syria, they get a little scared. "I, with my work, can change this idea a little. I can be an example of good integration."

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

"I want to stay and live here", in answering the question about his expectations for the future, even though his family remains in Damascus. *"I want to finish my studies, work, raise a family"*. He thinks having great prospects of work. He also says that life is beautiful here. He refers to food (especially cod). *"I like freedom, which I was not used to. I have a future here"*. He feels happy at the University of Coimbra. He has what he needs. *"I have a great professor doctoral advisor"*. *"I'm very lucky"*

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² Ex: <https://www.publico.pt/2017/02/11/sociedade/noticia/mohammad-o-refugiado-sirio-que-brilha-na-robotica-em-coimbra-176169>

MOHAMMAD, THE SYRIAN REFUGEE SHINNING IN ROBOTICS

In the end, he talks about his doctoral thesis, which he carries out in the scope of the European project: *ColRobot: Collaborative Robotics for Assembly and Kitting in Smart Manufacturing*³. It is intended to avoid collisions between robots and humans, in context of a “smart factory”.

In the laboratory, equipped with sensors, he exemplifies, with several movements of approach of a robotic arm, that deviates from the movements of the researcher. “*Here, future is being created*”, he says. As affirmed by his advisor professor, Pedro Neto⁴, the young Syrian is today “*a very important member of the laboratory*”. “*There is a shortage of skilled researchers in this area, and he has, to a certain extent, suppressed this lack*”,

he emphasizes, considering that “it is not common” to find someone with the expertise of Mohammad, Syrian, Portuguese or from any other nationality...

We are
people like the
others, who happen
to be refugees...

³ <https://colrobot.eu/about-colrobot>

⁴ <https://www.publico.pt/2017/02/11/sociedade/noticia/mohammad-o-refugiado-sirio-que-brilha-na-robotica-em-coimbra-176169>