Amro was 25 when he fled Latakia, Syria four years ago. Once a quiet coastal city that sits along the azure coast of the Mediterranean, Latakia is now home to a Russian air base where the sound of fighter jets reverberates above the city amidst the country’s ongoing civil war.

When Amro left Syria, he traded the familiarity of home for the bureaucracy of the American asylum system. He became just one of tens of thousands of foreigners mired in a backlogged system that often leaves vulnerable and traumatized applicants waiting years to begin a stable new life free of the chaos they had to flee. For these individuals it can mean navigating challenging financial, housing and health issues.

While he waited for an asylum appointment, Amro – who asked that his last name not be shared – took to the beloved American pastime of watching television. But for him, watching television was not about relaxing at the end of the day—it was how he learned English so he could eventually get a job.

“I was watching a lot of comedies, American T.V. shows to help me with the accent,” he said recently. “I was trying to find a job because without English you will not find a job, to eat.”

Asylum seekers have a unique, and often disadvantaged, status within the U.S. immigration system. While refugees apply for resettlement ahead of time, and are placed within communities by a federal program, asylum seekers show up unannounced at a border or port of entry, often alone and without a community to welcome them. They are forbidden to work for at least six months (and often longer), receive no federal benefits and wait as long as three and a half years for an appointment at offices that are eight times more backlogged than they were five years ago.

Amro got lucky.

He submitted his application just before the backlog skyrocketed in 2012, when pending cases rose from 9,274 to 15,526 in just one year. But even Amro’s decision took eight months, during which time he survived on money sent from his brother in Qatar.

“If I did not have my brother I would not be able to make it,” he said. “The process was very long. It’s better than now, but it took eight months to get my asylum.”

Part of the reason for the backlog is the scarcity of staff and offices. There are only eight offices in the entire U.S. that schedule asylum interviews. The asylum interview is the crucial in-person appointment when asylum seekers state their case for why they should remain in the U.S. The success or failure of the interview determines the fate of an applicant’s claim.

But scheduling an interview—and even getting there—is no simple process.

Depending on the office, wait times for interviews currently range from one and a half years to three and a half years. The San Francisco office, for example, schedules interviews two years after applications come in; but asylum seekers at the Los Angeles office wait three and a half. Applicants are assigned to their closest office, not the office with the shortest wait time—so entering the country at a random border crossing could delay your application by years, compared to someone who enters just one state away.

With the exception of Chicago, every office is near one of the U.S. coasts. This uneven distribution means asylum seekers settling between the coasts—or in Hawaii or Alaska—will sometimes travel more than 1,000 miles for their appointment.

“This isn’t because the asylum officers or the immigration judges aren’t working hard,” said Maryellen Fullerton, a law professor at Brooklyn Law School. “They’re working super hard, but they’ve got so many cases, and they’re understaffed, and they’re under-resourced and congress hasn’t funded more employees.”

According to Fullerton, the backlog is a problem for both the asylum seekers, whose lives end up in limbo, and for the government, which can’t deport asylum seekers who don’t meet the requirements until a decision has been made.

But while securing an interview is important, making a credible case for gaining asylum is what’s critical for applicants, which often requires difficult-to-obtain evidence of mistreatment and even torture.

“Gathering evidence from a far away place in a different culture and a different legal system is always hard, and even harder in these circumstances because the opportunity to leave has come in a hurry,” said Fullerton. “It’s hard to have documentary evidence of those kinds of horrible deeds. Whoever does them, governments or other people, tend not to leave written records of them. So it’s hard to get access to that information and present it and to make sure if you do have it you’re able to preserve it throughout your journey.”

The stakes for asylum seekers are high: if an application is denied, they face deportation or the decision to remain inside the U.S. illegally. A quick look at the numbers of annual asylum seekers—and the number of claims granted—shows how clogged the system really is.

In 2014, the OECD estimates that 121,160 people entered the U.S. and filed for asylum. That same year, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, there was already a backlog of 61,525 pending cases. By the end of the year, only 23,533 applicants had been granted asylum—many of whom had already been waiting years. Given the current wait times, many of the asylum seekers who entered the U.S. in 2014 are still waiting for an appointment. Last year, the number of backlogged cases jumped again, to 82,175.

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The system backlog has been caused by stagnant funding that hasn’t has kept pace with global political upheavals that have contributed to an uptick in the number of people seeking asylum. These include the civil war in Syria, and drug cartel-related violence in Central America, which has resulted in thousands of people to flood the southern border.

But for the asylum seekers themselves, underfunding means that delays exacerbate very personal challenges that include financial trouble, precarious housing, time away from family and, for many, trauma stemming from bring tortured back home.

“Torture is a way of life in my country,” said Muhannad Al-Hassani, who was a human rights lawyer for twenty years in Syria before he was arrested by the Assad regime. He managed to flee to the U.S. in 2011, but not before being tortured in prison. “Human rights lawyers in Syria should be expect to be arrested at any time.”

Al-Hassani’s asylum application was delayed for more than a year, and many of his Syrian friends are still mired in the system.

[VIDEO OF AL-HASSANI]

“Some of them one year, some of them two year, some of them three year,” he said. Those friends, he said, are lacking government support because of the delay. “Still waiting is meaning that they can’t use all the benefits of refugees.”

As both an immigrant and a torture survivor, Al-Hassani is not unique.

New research from the Center for Victims of Torture estimates that 44 percent of all refugees in the U.S. —including those who have gained asylum—are victims of physical or psychological torture. This means that there are around 1.3 million torture survivors in the country, which is equivalent to the population of New Hampshire.

Most of these victims, many of whom are asylum seekers, suffer from lingering psychological trauma, and few have access to treatment. The National Consortium of Torture Treatment Programs recently finished the first comprehensive study of torture victims in the U.S. The results were staggering: 69 percent suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and half suffer from a major depressive disorder.

“It’s a large, growing, invisible population,” said Kathi Anderson, executive director of Survivors of Torture International, based in San Diego. “Trauma is inherent in being a torture survivor. Many come by themselves. Refugees come as family units. But for asylum seekers it’s a very dangerous journey.”

Additionally, torture victims don’t always seek help. In 2013, researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, found that victims of torture often hide their experiences from physicians, due to a fear of authority and the fact that doctors were even sometimes involved in inflicting torture. Torture victims are also far more likely to experience depression, anxiety, sadness, insomnia and night terrors.

Even when they seek out help, therapy may not be a familiar cultural practice for torture survivors.

“People who come from cultures where therapists are well known are more likely to speak to therapists,” said Anderson. “In Argentina, for them to seek out therapy it’s like rolling out of bed. But in other communities there’s not even a word in their language for therapy.”

The population of torture victims in the U.S. spans generations—some have just arrived as asylum seekers, and some have been in the country for decades. For example, Amu—who also asked for his name to be withheld—was a respected pathologist in Khuzestan, Iran when the Shah’s secret police stormed his hospital office in 1974. After finding leftist literature in the drawers of his desk, they hauled him back home, where his pregnant wife watched as they tore apart the house and then took him away in a Jeep. For weeks, he was tortured.

“They lay you down on a bare bed, they tie your hands on the top, and then they put your foot at the bottom,” he remembered. “Then with a cable, they hit you on the soles of your feet, which is extremely, extremely painful. At night, they would hang me so that my feet were not on the floor.”

Amu eventually escaped prison in 1979 during Iran’s revolution, and fled to Austria on foot to seek asylum. But because his medical accreditation didn’t transfer—a common problem among highly-skilled asylum seekers—he found his way to the U.S.

Being a victim of torture can help with one’s asylum application—the U.S. is a signatory to the U.N. Convention Against Torture, which prohibits countries from deporting survivors back to their countries of origin.

“The burden is on that individual to show that they meet the requirements,” said Meredith Fortin, asylum program officer at Physicians for Human Rights, which provides evaluations of asylum seekers to back up their testimony. “Trauma can impact memory—that’s very common—and that could be the type of thing that can be very challenging in court.”

Financially, asylum seekers are hindered by federal regulations that prohibit working for 180 days. The U.S. is unique among Western nations in limiting the right to work for asylum seekers. There is even a provision in federal immigration law that will “stop the clock” on the 180-day countdown if the applicant is deemed to have delayed the process by, for example, turning in paperwork late. Human Rights Watch found that among asylum cases in 2011, the clock was stopped 92 percent of the time.

Even basic financial necessities like finding a home are affected by these employment regulations.

“So many of these people don’t have housing, or have short-term housing,” said Perth Rosen, interim director of Lutherin Immigration and Refugee Service in Baltimore. “Court cases are backlogged for so long that even if you have housing you could over-burden the good will of family members hosting you, who might also be impacted by poverty. It’s not uncommon that migrants end up in homeless shelters as they struggle to find footing.”

Despite the challenges and uncertainty of obtaining asylum in the U.S. and then building a new life, some still hold out hope that they might one day be able to return home. Amro is one of those people.

“The biggest dream for me—I want to go back to Syria. There’s no place like home,” he said. “Even here life and everything is good but there’s no place like home. I want to go back to Syria. I want to grow up in Syria. I want to have kids in Syria.”