

Changing eating habits among refugees from the Middle East

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Overview

One might face many challenges as a refugee in a foreign country, often related to living conditions, day to day habits, or food culture. In my research project, I asked:

- Have there been changes in refugees' food habits and in the rituals connected to eating?
- Have guest/host relations been affected?

The research was conducted between July and October 2019. The methods used were participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with 16 refugees from the Middle East.



Kitchen in a refugee reception center in Bonn. Photo: Elene Shubladze, September 2019.



Home-made meal in a refugee reception center in Bonn.
Photo: Elene Shubladze, September 2019.

Customs and Rituals

Hosting guests and treating them well are the cornerstones of Middle Eastern hospitality. The rules of hospitality are taught from early childhood and one grows into being a good host. In the context of forced migration, hospitality may seem difficult to realize.

“Back home I have always invited my friends over. I miss that. [...] We could also go out, of course, but it is not as common. Why go out when you can invite friends over?”
Mariam from Syria, 29 years

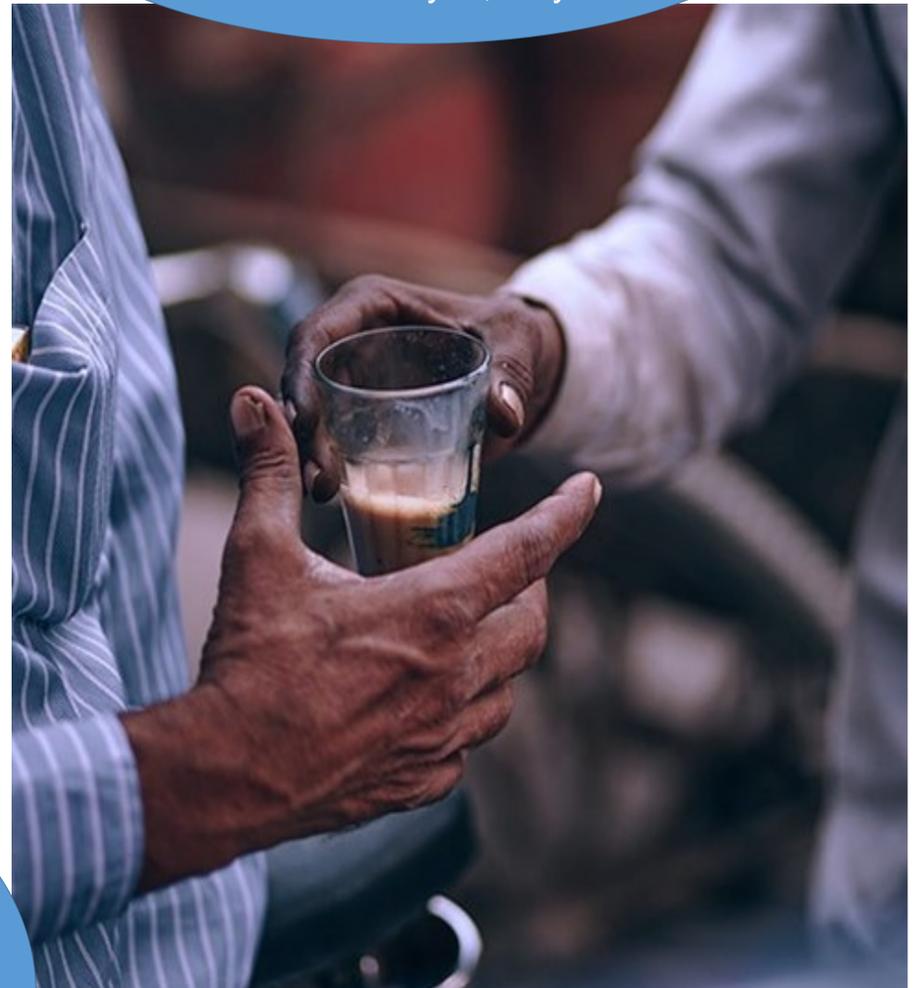
Findings

Many food habits and connected rituals have been maintained but may be adjusted to local conditions. Most adult respondents said that while much has changed in their lives, they still cook and enjoy the same meals as before. As long as circumstances allow it, they continue to exercise the habitual rituals, such as cooking large meals together with relatives and friends, inviting guests and treating them with honor, and reciprocating food gifts received from neighbors.

Adjustments in food habits are common with young adults and families with children who interact with their new social environment through kindergartens and schools. Different housing conditions also require adjustments.

“Normally I would have invited my friends home, I love hosting guests, it's a tradition. But here we don't have much space and I don't want to bother my husband, so we go out.” Mariam from Syria, 29 years

“The other day, he [son] brought home this butter that he tasted at school. I wouldn't have selected it at the supermarket. I don't even know what it is.” Sami from Palestine, 56 years



Hospitality from Around the World.
Photo courtesy of London College of Contemporary Arts.