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This short brief serves to highlight how the meaning and place of the BVOR program has shifted across three distinct moments in the span of its short existence. We present these three moments as first, the creation of the program under the former federal Conservative government led by PM Harper; second, the uptake of the program during the Syrian resettlement initiative promised by the new Liberal government of PM J. Trudeau; and third, the current moment in which the question of the sustainability and global replication of the program is top of mind.

We outline these three distinct moments in the BVOR ‘life cycle’ and glean insight from our closed dataset that traces the motivations of 530 private sponsors across Canada who supported Syrian refugees after November 2015. In particular, **our data show that the clear majority of respondents were first time sponsors (80%), with no ‘echo effect’ considerations.** The ‘echo effect’ refers to the pattern of sponsors agreeing to assist families and individuals already sponsored, who have family members left behind in refugee situations. The Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) pathway allows sponsors to name the person or family they wish to sponsor, facilitating (in some cases) family reunification. In the BVOR stream, UNHCR normally does the assessment and referral to Canada, so naming is not possible. **Our research shows that a clear majority of BVOR-sponsored Syrians asked their sponsors if they would sponsor subsequent family members, evidence that BVOR sponsorship spawns subsequent demand for PSR sponsorships.** Specifically, 58.2% of sponsors (BVOR and PSR) who answered this question reported that they had been approached for subsequent sponsorships. For BVOR sponsors, the proportion of former refugees requesting a subsequent sponsorship for family reunification from their sponsors was higher at 66.3%.

The Three Moments of BVOR Sponsorships

Moment 1: Creation

The BVOR program arose out of the previous government’s desire to solve a problem: it was a response to the *de facto* family reunification dimension of private sponsorship (Black 2013). Family reunification is achieved through naming whereby sponsors agree to bring subsequent family members to Canada, if they meet Canada resettlement eligibility criteria. The use of visa office referrals from UNHCR for private sponsorship was modest. The premise of the BVOR program, and various pilot programs that preceded it (Labman 2016) is a partial financial contribution from the government that reclaims government control over the refugee to be sponsored (via the visa officer). The challenge of the new program was that sponsors did not share the government’s sense that family reunification and naming were problematic. As external research and reports have shown, sponsorship agreement holders (SAHs) and sponsors in their constituent groups like to steer their sponsorships and decide their priorities based on resources, within the scope of the sponsorship architecture and rules (Labman and Pearlman 2018). The government’s 50/50 cost sharing was not incentive enough for long-standing

sponsors to relinquish the decision-making role of naming and selection of specific refugees to be resettled. The challenges of the program are visible in its uptake with only – 153 arrivals in 2013 and 177 in 2014 despite government aspirations of 200-300 arrivals in the first year and 400-500 in the second year. Whether the BVOR model would have survived as a sustainable resettlement program without changes in this moment is unclear.

Moment 2: Syrian Initiative

The surge in resettlement numbers tied specifically to Syrian refugees was the product of many things: dramatic and large-scale drownings in the Mediterranean as boatloads of asylum seekers sought refuge in Europe, especially starting April 2015; the image of and Canadian connection to a drowned boy named Alan Kurdi on a Turkish beach in September 2015; a 2015 fall election in Canada in which Syrian refugee resettlement was an explicit issue for all party leaders; and finally execution of an election promise made by then newly minted PM Justin Trudeau to sponsor 25,000 Syrians in 3 months. Almost 4000 Syrian refugees arrived in Canada, sponsored as BVORs, between November 2015 and January 2017. The BVOR category offered an additional pathway to protection for more Syrians and was employed at a scale not seen before.

Our survey, funded by IRCC and SSHRC, aims to understand the sponsors' motivations to act and the meaning of this work to them as Canadians. From our survey data, we identify three key points:

- 1) According to sponsors in our survey, most of the Syrians sponsored had no links to family or friends in Canada. Among the 484 responses recorded for this question, **most Syrians families (or units) had no link whatsoever to family or friends in Canada (70.2%). Among BVORs, the number increases to 208, or 96.7%,** of Syrians have no links to either friends or family compared with PSRs who reported that 50.9% had a previous connection with either a friend or family member in Canada.
- 2) **80.0%, of our survey respondents were first time sponsors in this period.** In our sample, 44.2% of survey respondents were BVOR sponsors; the balance were private sponsors in the traditional PSR program;
- 3) A cross-tabulation of 'first time sponsors' with BVOR sponsorship reveals that **45.8% of 1st time sponsors supported refugees in the BVOR category.**

We acknowledge that our findings are not a random sample nor necessarily representative of all sponsors. Nonetheless, our results show that first-time sponsors with no historical connection to or experience in the program were much more likely to sponsor a Syrian BVOR family or person. In Moment 2, the success of the BVOR program in providing additional protection spaces can be measured, in part, in overall numbers jumping to 810 admissions in 2015 and then almost six-fold to 4,434 admissions in 2016. The question remains whether such numbers would have been achieved without the rush of new, first-time sponsors.

In this Syrian-focused moment, the BVOR program offered Canadians a pathway to respond to a crisis much in the same way the original creation of the private sponsorship program in the late 1970s permitted Canadians to sponsor Indochinese refugees entirely unknown to them and exponentially increased admissions through the program beyond the original intent (Molloy et al.

2017). BVOR sponsorships did not, however, deter sponsors from naming and family reunification as was intended in Moment 1.

Moment 3: Sustainability and Replication

The current moment of the BVOR program is one where the program is at once celebrated for its success as part of the Syrian Initiative during Moment 2 and held up for replication abroad, but also struggling to find uptake without the surge of public and political support in fall 2015. Sustaining the modest uptake of BVOR sponsorship from Moment 1 may be possible, given the formal commitment from some large SAHs to BVOR refugees, which make up more than half of their sponsorships (i.e. Mennonite Central Committee), but maintaining the pace and numbers of Moment 2 is proving difficult.

Looking first at sustainability, the challenge of 2018 was unfilled BVOR spots. In summer 2018 UNHCR, Amnesty International and the Canadian Government all promoted BVOR refugee sponsorships to fill the unclaimed spaces in the program. The BVOR Fund was established in 2018 with funding from donors to cover the sponsors' 50% financial commitment for all remaining spots within a limited window of time. With this added enticement of no cost to sponsors, the BVOR program in this moment looks more like a Joint-Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) or type of Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR) host matching program.

Additional incentives were added to this mix in fall 2018 further when SAHs were offered one additional PSR allocation in 2019, if they accepted a BVOR during the 2018 window, when BVOR spaces remained underutilized and available.

Based on past experience, Labman & Pearlman (2018) note that the Syrian BVOR sponsors are likely to shift their subsequent sponsorship efforts into the PSR stream in order to assist the first BVOR family they supported bring in further relations. Our dataset confirms this: as noted, overall **58.2% of sponsors who answered this question (both BVOR and PSR) reported that they had been approached for subsequent sponsorships by the families they sponsored.** For BVOR sponsors specifically, the figure was higher at **66.3%.** **In this way, the BVOR program can be understood as anchor program for the PSR program, generating new demand for PSRs in two-thirds of BVOR families settled.**

The further challenge to the sustainability of the BVOR program is linked to the reality that most sponsorship occurs through SAHs. SAHs are incentivized to sponsor BVOR refugees through the 50% reduced requirement for financial support, expedited paperwork and arrivals and the greater scope for sponsorships compared to the PSR caps placed on each SAH.

Our research reveals that SAHs are hesitant to sponsor BVORs over PSRs if it risks leaving the allocation of PSR spots made to SAHs unused. SAHs are then at risk of losing those PSR allocations in future years, with no certainty they can get them back. For example, if a SAH prioritized a BVOR family over a PSR one, and did not use all of their allocated PSR spots, the capacity to sponsor and number of spaces for PSRs would shrink in the following year, limiting scope for named sponsorships if needed. In short, **the current architecture of PSR allocations, with capped numbers across SAHs, creates risk for SAHs of losing scarce PSR spots and mitigates against BVOR sponsorship.** While sponsors are often sympathetic to BVOR applications and need, many prefer to fill their PSR spots first before accepting BVOR

cases. And yet incentivizing BVOR sponsorship by offering ‘free’ PSR space or allocations, as in fall 2018, seems only to distort sponsorship in a different direction. As noted above, the demand for these limited full PSR spots increases as BVOR arrivals create new demand for named spots.

Table 1 Cross tabulation: Type of sponsorship (BVOR/PSR) and serial/first-time sponsor

	serial	first time	total
BVOR	36 (16.5%)	182(83.5%)	218
PSR	60 (21.8%)	215(78.2%)	275
Total	96	397	493
BVOR	36/96 (37.5%)	182/397(45.8%)	
PSR	60/96 (62.5%)	215/397(54.2%)	

In the table above, several important observations can be gleaned. First, ‘serial sponsors’, or those with experience as sponsors before the Syrian cohort, were much *less* likely to sponsor a BVOR (36 of 96, or 37.5%) than a PSR (60 of 96, or 62.5%), even with the cost-sharing incentive of the BVOR program. In comparison almost 46% of first-time sponsors accepted a BVOR family or person. Serial sponsors were hugely outnumbered by first-time sponsors *in our sample*. Again, we can make no claims having a representative pool of responses, since respondents were self-selecting, but all indications are that first-time sponsors are likely to outnumber seasoned sponsors overall.

References

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