

Ukrainian Wives Fleeing Syria

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Murtada speaking to her mother at Kiev's airport as her boys wait nearby. **Efrem Lukatsky**

KIEV — It was a life from a fairy tale that turned into hell.

Hundreds of Eastern European women married to Syrian men have fled the war with their children in recent weeks as fighting intensified, splitting up families and leaving them wondering whether they can ever go back.

Among them is Kseniya Murtada, a 36-year-old Ukrainian who fled Syria last week with two sons, ages 3 and 5, leaving her husband, Aziz, in Aleppo, Syria's biggest city and the focus of a major battle between government and rebel forces.

"Who knows what might happen? This is a war," said Murtada, who was among more than 200 Ukrainians evacuated on a government plane last week.

"Our men have stayed there. They will fight, and they will defend their home," she said. "Some families will be broken; some kids will lose their fathers. But we all live with hope."

The marriages between Eastern European women and Syrians are believed to number in the

thousands. They result from close ties first forged in the 1960s when the Soviet Union, its Eastern European satellite states and the former Yugoslavia began welcoming students from the Middle East and Africa with the aim of spreading their influence around the world through an educated elite.

Yugoslavia was then a leader of the nonaligned movement, which had close ties to the Assad family regime. The Soviet Union, for its part, had an interest in spreading its political influence in the volatile Middle East. Oleksandr Bogomolov, president of the Kiev-based Center for Middle East Studies, said Soviet authorities encouraged the marriages as a way to gain influence with the Syrian elite since most of the Syrian students came from prominent families.

For the women, marriage to a foreigner offered an escape from communist repression and the promise of a better life abroad, and many were attracted to Syria's cultural wealth and good climate.

The tradition has continued since the Soviet collapse, with Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian women still eager for better living conditions abroad and husbands who don't drink, though such marriages abated in the former Yugoslavia during its bloody breakup in the 1990s.

Murtada, who met her husband when he was studying computer engineering in the Black Sea port of Odessa, was taken by her husband's charm.

"He was so romantic, always with flowers, always very kind and polite, so I could not help but marry him," she said.

Many of the Syrian men who married women from the ex-communist countries are believed to be members of the educated Alawite elite, the group most under threat from a rebel insurgency dominated by the country's Sunni majority. The Assad regime only let its supporters travel to Europe in the Communist period.

"These women did not land in some village and did not have to struggle for a living," said Katarzyna Gorak-Sosnowska, a professor in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Warsaw in Poland. "They are the wives of men educated at European universities, academies."

Among those who fled in recent days was Biljana Ayoubi, a 53-year-old Serbian mother who left Syria on a Serbian plane with her three children along with nearly 40 others, almost all of them the wives and children of Syrians. To her, there is no doubt who is to blame for the carnage that forced her to leave her husband in Aleppo.

"Americans are to blame. They have been financing the rebels, along with Qatar and Saudi Arabia," she said, adding that her husband stayed behind because "he did not want to return; he was too proud."

Ayoubi said she hoped the Syrian army "will win and we will go back" to Aleppo, adding that Assad "has nothing to do" with the carnage.

Svetlana Djurdjevic, a 53-year-old Bosnian-born woman who returned on the same Serbian

government flight, said the sectarian violence reminds her of the 1992-95 war in her native country, which she escaped with her marriage.

"It's a civil war there, just like it was in Bosnia," she said. "They are fighting to change things for the better, but it turned out it can't get any worse."

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