

## GUIDE TO EXCHANGING A SYRIAN DRIVER'S LICENSE FOR AN ONTARIO DRIVER'S LICENSE (Revision 3, UPDATED APRIL 27, 2016)

This guide speaks to how a Syrian refugee may obtain an Ontario driver's license. General requirements are found on <http://www.drivetest.ca/EN/Pages/default.aspx>. The guide includes additional information not currently on the web, and provides tips for getting a non-English speaking refugee through the system. It also applies to other nationalities who do not have a reciprocal agreement with Ontario (listed at <http://www.drivetest.ca/EN/licencing/Pages/Exchanging-a-Reciprocal-Licence.aspx>). For example, your sponsored refugee may have a Jordanian license

The guide is based on the experience of taking one Syrian applicant through the process at the DriveTest office at 1570 Walkley Road, Ottawa, plus advice received by phone from DriveTest Ontario. Topics like contradictory information on the web, international driver's licenses, and lessons, are covered under FAQs at bottom.

**First Step: As soon as possible, please check the expiry date on the driver's license held by your sponsored Syrian. If the license is still valid, you will want to move forward before it expires.**

### OBJECTIVE: AT LEAST A G2 LICENSE

Ontario now has a "graduated licensing program", that takes up to two years to complete. (<http://www.drivetest.ca/EN/faq/Documents/2010gradlicbookEnglish.pdf>) Beginner drivers pass a written test to obtain a "G1" restricted license. After eight to 12 months wait, they are eligible to take a road test for a "G2" license. After another 12 months wait, they may take another road-test for a full license.

Syrian refugees will want to get at least a G2 license as quickly as possible. With a G2, a driver who is at least 20 years of age can drive by themselves and/or carry passengers. The principle G2 restriction is zero alcohol (not usually an issue with our group). The lesser G1 is not practical for independent adults. It requires you have a fully licensed driver in the car with you and you cannot use highways and must be off the road by midnight. (details at <http://www.drivetest.ca/EN/faq/Documents/2010gradlicbookEnglish.pdf>)

### TIMING

It is advisable to deal with driver's license as soon as possible after getting the Ontario Health Card and the Ontario Photo Card. The Ontario Photo Card is not strictly necessary, but it makes proof of identity much easier (see below). Reasons for doing it quickly are:

- The Syrian driver's license becomes outdated. To get immediate credit at the G2 level, the license must still be valid. For our Syrian driver – his license was due to expire in the next month.
- It can save the family thousands of dollars in insurance later if/when they can afford a car. This matters whether or not your Syrian has a valid driver's license from Syria. Because Ontario insurers have no access to Syrian records, they treat an adult Syrian driver as a new

driver – the same as a 16 year old. The sooner an Ontario license is obtained, the sooner the clock starts ticking, crediting them with driver experience. The difference in insurance between having had a license for a year, and having got the license yesterday, is large.

The written test is available Arabic, so knowledge of English or French is not necessary (<http://www.drivetest.ca/EN/drivereducation/Pages/Driver-Testing.aspx>). In our experience, there was no problem having the Arabic test at the 1570 Walkley Road office. The staff was highly familiar with the process.

Vision should also be checked first. The driver must pass a vision test right at the counter, even before doing the written test.

### **Side Comment on Ontario Photo Card**

Having an Ontario Photo Card will simplify ID when applying for an Ontario driver's license.

Our family support group skipped the Ontario Photo Card to save the \$35. It seemed redundant at the time because the Ontario health card also has photo and signature. However, Ontario law forbids the use of the Ontario health card as ID under most circumstances (you can't take a copy since it can be used to access private health information). For example, Costco would not let us buy a membership for the family using the Health card as ID. For those who don't already have a driver's license, Costco asks for the Ontario Photo Card. The same is true for most other businesses and agencies.

### **1. DOES YOUR REFUGEE HAVE A CURRENTLY VALID SYRIAN DRIVERS LICENSE?**

All foreign drivers from Syria must pass the written G1 test and road-test for G2, to obtain a G2 license. However, Ontario has an accelerated process for those with a currently valid Syrian license that allows them to skip the 12 month waiting period between the written test and road-test, allowing the successful driver to receive the desired G2 license almost immediately. (Description at <http://www.drivetest.ca/en/licencing/pages/out-of-country-drivers.aspx>.)

#### **Accelerated Process: Getting Credit for up to 12 months Driving Experience**

In formal terms, if the driver has a Syrian license that has not yet expired, they can be credited as already having 12 months driving experience. To get this credit, you must provide:

- The original Syrian driver's license. The expiration date will be on the license.
- A translation of both sides of the license into English (or French). The translation must be made and certified by a translator of the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario (AITO). The interpreter will have an ATIO stamp. The translator may accept e-mail delivery of scans of the license, but you will have to arrange physical pick-up or delivery of the certified translation, since it must bear the translator's signature and the stamp.

You will get the license back immediately, but DriveTest will keep the certified translation.

A potential list of translators for this purpose may be found at <http://search.atio.on.ca/search/do/SE10019204f3d>. Here are four, three of which were drawn from

the list. Some are busy, so you may have to try more than one to find one available. Mention OCRA (or e-mail exchange with Dan Hara).

- Samir Marcos. (\$30). We used Mr. Marcos successfully for our test run. He was the first to reply to our general enquiry of the ATIO list. He received scans by e-mail, and provided a stamped translation that was accepted at the DriveTest counter. Drawbacks are that Mr. Marcos is slightly more expensive (\$30). He is an elderly retired gentleman operating a brisk translation business out of his home. Oral communication was somewhat difficult, requiring repetition. [s\\_morcoss4@msn.com](mailto:s_morcoss4@msn.com) 613-421-6337, 265 Viewmont Drive K2E 737
- Maha Bustami (\$20). Ms. Bustami also replied to our enquiry. She quotes a special rate of \$20 and will also work with e-mailed scans (both sides). Mention Dan Hara and OCRA. [maha.bustami@sympatico.ca](mailto:maha.bustami@sympatico.ca), P. 613-843-8550, F. 613-843-8580, C. 613-327-9965. 57 Alberni Street. K2J 1V8
- Danny Saikaley (\$30 discounted from \$40) [mena\\_translation@yahoo.ca](mailto:mena_translation@yahoo.ca) Mr. Saikaley also replied, including a stated discount from his regular rate. Phone: 613-800-1759 Mobile: 613-795-6218. 204 Lucinda Crescent K1w 0a1
- Marwan al Khouri. (\$20) [malkhouri@live.ca](mailto:malkhouri@live.ca) 613-262-3316 Marwan kindly translated the driver's license for Family Support Group 8 and expressed interest in helping out further (mention OCRA and Dan or Batoul). Marwan is an ATIO translator referred by friends – he has not listed himself in a way that turns up his name on the ATIO search web-site for this particular service

Avoiding pitfalls:

- Be sure to provide the Roman alphabet spelling of the name as provided on the Canadian government forms, as they need to match the translators version (the Syrian license is in Arabic of course). For example, we used the "Confirmation of Permanent Residence" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada form #IMM5688)
- Similarly, you should provide the birthdate that is shown on Canadian government forms, as this needs to match too. The Syrian license uses a lunar calendar, so translation to the CE calendar is somewhat arbitrary. Your translator may simply name the month and year (hopefully the same as the Canadian forms).
- Proof read the result to be sure that all this is in order, including expiry date etc.

## 2. PROVIDING PERSONAL ID

The driver must provide proof of identity. An Ontario Photo Card is sufficient. A list of alternate acceptable documents, and combinations of documents, is provided at <http://www.drivetest.ca/EN/licencing/Pages/How-to-Apply.aspx>.

If your Syrian doesn't have an Ontario Photo Card yet, then they may not have any of the acceptable combinations of documents on the list. However, DriveTest advised us by phone that this combination was acceptable:

- Original copy of: Confirmation of Permanent Residence (form IMM 5688, bearing the government stamp and the signature of the refugee).
- Ontario Health Card

This worked at the counter. The DriveTest staff person at Walkley road was fully familiar with this document combination. Both documents are returned before you leave the counter. *This combination of documents is a temporary arrangement as of April 2016.*

### 3. STUDYING FOR THE G1 WRITTEN TEST

All applicants must write the G1 test. The Arabic version is on paper, and must be written without assistance in a separate examination area.

Your Syrian driver will want to prepare for the written test. Although they may be experience drivers, the test also includes questions on Ontario rules of the road, alcohol laws, etc. The test has separate parts, so you can pass the signage part, but fail the Ontario rules part. In our first experience, our Syrian driver passed the first part, but failed the second.

Here are some internet resources for studying (familiarity with google translate may help):

- **Sample tests in Arabic.** <http://www.apnatoronto.com/ontario-g1-test-arabic/>. Warning: our candidate passed **one of these** easily – leading to over-confidence and failure on the Ontario rules part of the actual test. **However, there is more than one test. Each is on a different subject (signs, rules of the road, etc.)**
- **Web version of Ontario driver handbook** (in English, there is no full Arabic translation), but may possibly be viewed using automatic google chrome translate when default google language set to Arabic, and “offer to translate page” turned on in google chrome settings. <http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/dandv/driver/handbook/index.shtml>
- **Google translate:** <https://translate.google.ca/> This free service is amazing. You can cut and past the Ontario handbook link into google translate, select translation to Arabic, and then the whole page becomes a viewer in Arabic for the Ontario hand-book – translation continues as you run through the handbook pages. [Optional advanced approach for techies: If your Syrian is not strong with computers, you can set up their Google Chrome browser to default to Arabic, with the option “offer to translate pages” checked off. Then set up the handbook site in google translate and save the page as part of the home page opening set. It is recommended you do this in a separate on-computer account so that an English account remains for other uses]
- **Although Ontario has not translated its driver hand-book, Prince Edward Island has.** This site is good for rules of the road in Canada but will not be accurate for things like blood alcohol limits in Ontario. Fortunately, you can turn right on a red light in PEI, same as Ontario. <http://www.peianc.com/sitefiles/File/booklets/Drivers-Handbook/DriversHandbook-AR-29-06-2009.pdf>

### 4. OTHER ADVANCE PREPARATION

We encountered several tripping points in our test experience. Some would have been facilitated if we had brought a translator. However, even these would have gone smoother with a bit of advance preparation:

- **The vision test.** This is administered at the desk. Your Syrian must be able to recognize and say the numbers zero to nine in either English or French. They must also understand to raise

their right or left hand, depending on which eye sees a flashing light. If corrective lens are needed, they should wear them for the test.

- **Answers to health and driving experience declaration.** It is a good idea to know the answers in advance to the standard declaration form that the driver must sign. This includes:
  - Declares that they have never been diagnosed as needing glasses or contact lenses to drive. (Presumably other than what was used in the vision test).
  - Declares that they do not have any diseases that would affect their safe driving (e.g. diabetes requiring insulin, heart condition). If such conditions do exist, they may still be allowed to proceed with testing, but may be required to provide medical documentation before being issued a license. If you know about these conditions in advance, you may seek advice from DriveTest.ca 1-800-489-8450.
  - Declaring the number of years' experience as a driver. This doesn't really matter since you only get 12 months, but it is better not to stumble over this when filling out the declaration form.

In our test experience, we got caught by surprise since our Syrian could not read the English form and I couldn't ask these questions in Arabic. I suspect that had I filled the form on a guess and got him to sign, there might have been questions. In our case, I phoned a translator who relayed the questions, so this worked OK.

- **Know the English words "Signature" and "Initials".** We had a moment of confusion over the phrase "sign here". More confusion later, when initials were required. Also helpful to discuss in advance that the signature should not go outside of the box.
- **Being able to answer orally the questions "What is your name? What is your birthday? What is your address?".** As part of their due diligence, the counter staff may ask the applicant these questions, to see if the oral answers match what the documents say. Answers must be oral – it is not enough to point at the documents in front of you.

## 5. APPLICATION PROCESS AND TAKING THE G1 WRITTEN TEST

The main office for DriveTest in Ottawa is located at 1570 Walkley Road. They are open only on weekdays during business hours. It is best to go early as the line-up may take some time, and the written test may take an hour. You may wish to arrive in the morning, and allow enough time to re-take the test should your Syrian fail the first time round.

Checklist of things to bring:

- Acceptable identification (see above, original documents only). We used the Confirmation of Permanent Residence in combination with an Ontario Health Card.
- \$148. This covers the written test, the road test, and the licenses. All the fees are paid up-front on application, even if the road test is not for a while.
- If the Syrian driver's license has not expired:
  - Syrian driver's license
  - Certified translation of license (see above)
- Optional: Expired Syrian driver's license. May come in hand.
- Optional: Proof of address. Could be a lease or a hydro bill with the name of the Syrian and the Ontario address to be used. In our case we brought a hydro bill, but we didn't have to use it. Our applicant understood and was able to answer orally the question "what is your address".

- Optional: translator. This is always helpful. In our test experience, I had translation help available by phone, but we were mostly able to cope without translation. It would have been better, however, to have previously discussed the oral questions in Section 4 above.

It may also be helpful to review in advance with your Syrian a step-by-step on what will happen. This would have avoided several issues we encountered, such as a lack of familiarity with appropriate cultural behavior in examination rooms, and what to do if you fail the test. Items in red below are suggested points to emphasis if you do an advance review.

**Take a number.** On arrival, there is a kiosk machine near the door. You press the appropriate kind of request and are issued a number. We pressed “exchange out of province license”. Even if your Syrian driver’s license is expired, you may wish to press this button in the interests of getting staff more experienced with your identification papers (for this it may be helpful to bring the expired Syrian driver’s license just to set the stage). Our staff member was very familiar with handling our type of case, and recognized our identification papers as valid immediately.

**Validate ID and Fill out forms and take Vision Test.** See advance preparation points above. There are questions that the applicant is expected to directly.

**Pay and Receive Receipt.** The receipt is a yellow piece of paper that should be kept. If your applicant fails the test, it is the only indicator they have of their file number, and the fact they have already paid. The receipt should be marked for the Arabic test. You take the yellow sheet to the testing centre at the other end of the hall.

**Taking the G1 test.** You may accompany the applicant to the testing counter to help with communication. Afterwards you must leave them and stand behind the barrier. Although the English Ontario test is by computer, the Arabic version is hard-copy. There are a few desks for applicants to sit at. It will help if your Syrian knows in advance that:

- You will have to leave them and observe from a distance.
- They will be alone. No translator either.
- They should not answer or take out their cell-phone (not obvious to those without an academic background).
- They take their finished paper back to the desk.
- They will be told immediately if they passed or failed.
- The desk officer may indicate the letter of the correct answers and provide a brief opportunity to study the correct answers.
- The test paper must be turned in before they leave the area, and they may NOT take a photo or write down anything.
- The desk officer will return their yellow receipt (which they should keep).
- If they failed they can take the written test again for approximately \$15. It appears possible to take it again the same day if there is enough time to get back in line at the main desk and pay the fee (we didn’t test this). Or they can come back later.
- If they re-take the test, they only need to do the part they failed. When re-taking, they should leave blank the part they passed previously.

Reviewing the above I advance will be particularly helpful if you won’t have a translator with you at the test.

In our test experience, I was able to approach the desk and assist with communication after the test was over. Unfortunately, I was unable to communicate the point about studying the errors, so we had to leave and come back another day. Had I covered this point in advance, we might have been able to manage a successful re-take of the test in the same day.

## 6. TAKING THE G2 ROAD TEST

Once the G1 written test is passed, the applicant receives a G1 license. This is not very useful to an adult (see Objective:G2 above). Those who received credit for their unexpired Syrian license can do the G2 test as soon as they are ready. Those who did not receive the experience credit must wait 12 months before they can do the G2 test. The waiting time can be reduced to 8 months if an approved driver training course is taken ( list at <http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/driver/driving-schools.shtml> ) An approved driver training course costs a fair amount, but pays for itself quickly. Most Ontario insurers offer reduced rates to those who have completed an approved course (check with your insurer of choice).

The G2 test appointment must be booked in advance, and can only be booked after passing the G1. The applicant must provide their own vehicle, and that vehicle must be in safe condition etc. (<http://www.drivetest.ca/EN/bookatest/Pages/RT-Info-and-Requirements.aspx> ) Note that the applicant must comply with G1 conditions until passing the G2. This means that they arrive with the test vehicle in the company of a licensed Ontario driver with at least four years' experience. (There is a specific warning on the DriveTest site about those G1 drivers who arrive by themselves and presumably get a ticket and are flunked immediately). If you are providing the vehicle, you may wish to check with your insurer. For example, some policies don't cover drivers under 25 years of age, or have other exclusions.

The G2 test is taken alone – just the applicant and the tester. According to desk staff, lack of Arabic is not a problem. The testers have learned to cope with language barriers. **Despite this, it may be helpful for the Syrian driver to take a preparation session with a professional teacher. The professional teacher can cover the key aspects of the test, including the actual route driven, and the nuances of Canadian driving (see Lessons? Under FAQ below).**

The G2 test is a “city” test. Applicants are not asked to go on the highway. Highway testing is part of the final road test when the applicant applies for a full G license (12 months later).

In our example experience we have not yet progressed to the G2 test. This guide will be updated when that is done.

## FAQS

- **Can you drive in Ontario on a valid Syrian Driver's License?**

If the license has not expired, you can drive for the first 60 days following arrival in Ontario. After that you must stop. In addition, Syrian refugees should be made aware of the obligation to have insurance. If they borrow someone else's car, that person should check to be sure their insurance covers the occasional use by other parties.

<http://www.drivetest.ca/EN/licencing/Pages/Exchanging-a-Reciprocal-Licence.aspx>

- **I have an International Driver's Permit/License – can I wait a year before worrying about an Ontario license?**

No, unfortunately you cannot wait. The 60 day limit still applies. Some refugee families had the forethought to acquire an International Drivers Permit (IDP) before they came to Canada. For visitors to Canada/Ontario, the IDP can be used along with a valid foreign license for periods of more than 3 months (possibly up to a year <https://www.ontario.ca/page/drive-ontario-visitors>). However, refugees are not visitors, they are residents of Ontario. For example, if a police officer stopped the car and was shown an IDP, the officer may also ask for additional identification, such as a passport. If the driver produces an Ontario photo card or similar ID, the officer will realize that the driver is a resident, not a visitor, and issue a ticket or take other action. In addition, it is important to get an Ontario license as soon as possible in order to save money on future car insurance (see Timing section above).

- **I see Government of Ontario web-sites that are different than information on the DriveTest site. Which is correct?**

There are indeed web-site pages on the general Ontario web-site and the Ontario Ministry of Transport site that may not be up-to-date. When there is a difference, the DriveTest.Ca site is the official site. DriveTest is the government agency that actually administers the tests and issues the licenses.

- **What about driving lessons?**

The common wisdom is that it always pays to take driving lessons. If the ultimate intent is to own a vehicle, then the cost of the lessons is more than repaid in reduced insurance rates from most insurers. The North American driving culture also differs from other countries, and defensive driving is a skill to be learned. Courses recognized by the Ontario government, and insurers, typically include 20 hours of in-class time, and 10 hours of road instruction.

Example. We have not yet done comparative research. The following is from RiteWay, interviewed by phone (Ali at 613-737-5070, Ali is Arabic speaking). RiteWay was selected based on its location close to the Glebe (1212 bank), and presence on the Ontario list of acceptable courses. A full course (20 hours class, 10 hours of one-on-one) is \$485 plus HST. RiteWay has a number of Arabic speaking instructors. In addition, Ali said that if they have 10 students, they can do the classroom course in Arabic.

- **I don't want to take driving lessons. Can I just take a quick lesson to be briefed on how to do the course?**

Yes. A professional instructor (Arabic speaking) can run the driver through the actual street course used for testing, and explain what is expected.

RiteWay (contact info above) suggested 2 hours at \$40 per hour – phone to discuss how long. If you are customer of RiteWay, RiteWay also offers the additional service package for the test itself: for \$60 they will provide the car for the test, and an Arabic speaking instructor will meet the driver at the DriveTest Offices and walk them through the paper-work etc. The actual test is done by DriveTest employees, alone with the applicant. RiteWay will wait back in the office (also presumably to get the car back).

