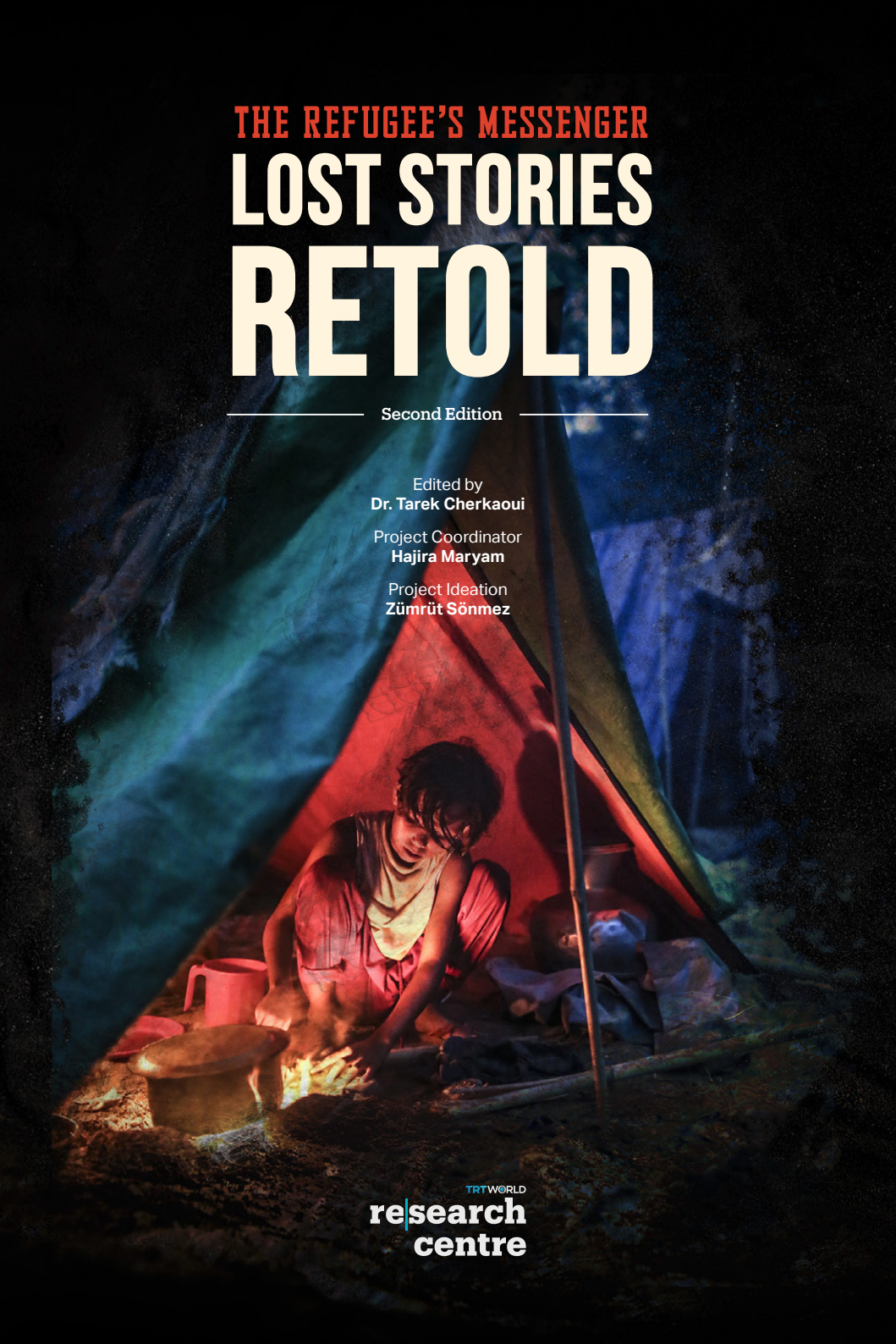


A photograph of a young child sitting inside a tent at night, cooking over a small fire. The tent is illuminated from within, casting a warm glow. The child is wearing a red and white striped shirt. A red pot and a metal pot are visible on the ground near the fire. The background is dark, suggesting it is nighttime.

THE REFUGEE'S MESSENGER LOST STORIES RETOLD

Second Edition

Edited by
Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui

Project Coordinator
Hajira Maryam

Project Ideation
Zümrüt Sönmez

TRT WORLD
**research
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THE REFUGEE'S MESSENGER
LOST STORIES
RETOLD

FOREWORD

There is no doubt that the refugee phenomenon is a global issue. The severity of the crisis has escalated to such levels that it is almost automatic to speak of it in structural terms, which is perhaps justified. As this point will be addressed later, let's first look at an oft-ignored aspect of the matter at hand: the problem of missing the trees for the forest.

Each individual is a universe. Yes, we share innumerable features with our countrymen, colleagues, family, and friends but, each human being is unique. One problem with the dominant refugee narrative is that refugees are reduced to numbers, or they are affiliated solely with large groups where their individualities are trivialized. Most academic and journalistic works use heuristics and easily expressible mental schemes to present their condition in general terms. Therefore, even when the stories of individuals are told, they are often presented only as side stories to the conflict that produced them. By focusing on the general conditions they find themselves in, their individuality is glossed over and their agency taken away.

This book is important in this sense. In the contents of this volume, my colleagues from TRT World try to restore this lost notion of individuality and also the agency of each refugee. It is true that being a refugee is part of their identity. However, while this is the broad class they are subsumed under, an overlooked fact is that there is much more beneath the surface. They are women, aspiring footballers, scholars, mothers, fathers, children, fans, inventors and musicians.

When we first devised the project of TRT World, we pledged to keep this fact in mind with every step. In our coverage today, we attempt to honour this pledge as much as possible. We believe in the responsibility of the story teller; we are the ones that hold the microphone, we are the ones behind the camera. Yet, we are not the stars of this story — they are.

Before I leave you with this book, it must be stressed that the need for a new global regime to address the refugee phenomenon is long overdue. Refugees around the world are plagued by similar circumstances that create their condition and leave them to the mercy of societies that are all too often unwelcoming or altogether hostile. As the problem is truly global, we need a global solution. Intolerance and barriers between people and societies are rising, it is imperative that the international community reach a common understanding that counters these negative trends and facilitates global cooperation primarily on the urgent phenomenon of refugees. We have no other way to move forward.

Accordingly, I am honoured to present you with the urgent and most recent work of the TRT World Research Centre and the vivid stories presented by our journalists.

İbrahim Eren,

Director General and Chairman of TRT

PREFACE

A major interest of TRT World is to devote time and coverage to the most sensitive issues of our time that many media platforms neglect. We take it as a duty to be the voice of the voiceless. Chief among those issues is the refugee phenomenon. This book is a fruit of that effort. It presents a number of stories that TRT World journalists tell about their experience covering refugees all over the world. Each chapter is a narrative presenting a particular branch of the refugee phenomenon that aims at being informative without flooding the subject with abstract details. These personal stories serve to show the human condition which we believe to be the most essential element of the phenomenon. While our colleagues try to be objective about the nature of the events and be fair to the truth, they do not deny the inherent subjectivity in every story. They cover the particulars of the story while drawing parallels between cases to show the major currents in the broader scheme of things.

Although we present stories from all over the world, we are closest to Istanbul, our headquarters. We live in a city which is populated by families with memories of movement from either the near or distant past. Istanbul has been gentle to all those who made it here, and has embraced them with its arms stretching from Europe to Asia. This city has been our inspiration. When the civil war in Syria began, Turkey implemented an open door policy which provided a respite to those who managed to escape the horrors of war. Many cities in the country, along with Istanbul, provided shelter to those who were driven from their homelands. We dedicate this book to those who yearn for their homes as well as to their hosts, who have wholeheartedly welcomed them.

Our book has three main purposes. First, we want to harness the power of stories. This is why we do this job. We believe that stories have the power to end the global stigmatization and dehumanization of refugees and the victims of war. Moreover, our purpose is not to present their plight and show them as subjects of misery. We believe that the reader will find the liveliness and joy in their story as well. We are confident that our stories will exhibit a wholesome picture of the refugee phenomenon. Secondly we want to give the stage to the main figures: the refugees themselves. We are not in this to try to impose meaning on their experience; we are all for letting people tell their own stories. Finally, we believe that our work will help bridge people and their presumed differences. It will emphasize our common humanity and spread peace and love rather than building walls between them.

This book is a confluence of several journeys. It is a tale of distinct, but nevertheless similar, stories. We have learnt a lot while preparing this. More than that, we have felt and gained insights. I thank every single journalist who took part in our project, and also our team at the TRT World Research Centre which has put a tremendous effort into it. Their passion made this work possible. I also thank those people of conscience who do their best to show that evil does not roam free in this world, and that make us retain our hope for a better future.

Pınar Kandemir,
Director of Research, TRT World

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SHAMIM ARA CHOWDHURY

Shamim Chowdhury has been working in international television news for more than 15 years. She was TRT World's main correspondent covering the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, where she returned to many times during 2017 and 2018, including when she accompanied the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Çavuşoğlu, and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım. She has also reported from Syria, Iraq, South and South-East Asia and across Europe.



FRANCIS COLLINGS

Francis Collings is a journalist who was brought up in the British overseas territory of Gibraltar. He's lived in eight countries so far, including Turkey. Prior to working for TRT World he was with BBC television and radio for many years in London.



SARA FIRTH

Sara Firth is a Foreign Correspondent and Photojournalist and has been working for TRT World as Middle East Correspondent since 2017. She has covered the war in Syria since the outset, both on the ground in the country and across the region, into areas where refugees have fled.



DR. MYRIAM FRANCOIS

Myriam Francois has worked as the correspondent for Europe for TRT World for many years. She has worked intensively on reporting Europe's "migrant crisis," mainly from France and the United Kingdom, with several trips to a camp in Calais, France—the so-called "Calais Jungle".



TANYA GOUDSOUZIAN

Tanya Goudsouzian is a Canadian journalist who has covered the Middle East and Afghanistan for over 15 years. She is former Opinion Editor at Al Jazeera English Online, and is currently Head of Interviews at TRT World.



ADESEWA JOSH

For almost a decade, Adesewa Josh has told hundreds of community stories in and about Africa. She spent the last five years reporting critically on the social impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on women and children. Other bodies of work include interviews with heads of states and African first ladies. She is a graduate of the Columbia Journalism School, New York. Adesewa brings fresh and nuanced perspective to Africa's politics, development and diplomatic relations. She was named one of Nigeria's most influential women 2019. She's a conference speaker and founder of Project Smile Africa, an NGO that promotes girls' education and health in Africa.



HAJIRA MARYAM MIRZA

Hajira Maryam Mirza is a researcher at the TRT World Research Centre. Her interests cluster around South Asian Affairs, Turkey-Pakistan relations, public diplomacy, media effects, media and society, media and public opinion. Hajira is also actively interested by the intersection of academic research, digital storytelling, and public outreach. In this context, she has produced several high-level interviews with top officials and academics, which are commonly featured by the digital arm of TRT World.



ALI MUSTAFA

Ali Mustafa is a presenter and correspondent with Turkey's public broadcaster TRT World. He has previously covered politics, security and society for Al Jazeera English, CBC-Radio/Canada, VICE News and CNBC since 2004. Ali graduated from the Master of Arts program at Columbia University with degrees in Politics and Journalism.



MARY SALIBA

Mary Saliba is an Istanbul-based global news journalist with TRT World. She has special expertise in Middle East political, security, legal and humanitarian affairs. Mary contributed extensively to Al Jazeera's coverage of the Arab Spring and has moderated international panels on peacebuilding, as well as providing commentary on religious harmony and cultural diversity.



ZÜMRÜT SÖNMEZ

Zümrüt Sönmez is a journalist and a writer, working at TRT World since 2015. She works as a producer and a programme editor for TRT World in Istanbul, London and Washington DC. She holds a bachelor's degree in Arabic Language and Literature and two masters degrees in Middle East Studies from Marmara University, and Migration and Diaspora Studies from SOAS University of London.



EDİZ TİYANŞAN

Ediz Tiyanşan is currently based in Los Angeles, as TRT World's Latin America Correspondent. Previously, he has reported from Israel and Palestine for seven years, providing extensive coverage of the wars in Gaza, Libya and Syria. He lived in seven countries, speaks seven languages, and uses empathy as the major driving force in his stories.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In the early 1990s, academics in media studies and political science coined the expression "CNN effect" as a reflection of the perceived impact of the 24-hour news coverage upon decision-makers. This expression induced that news television in general, and CNN in particular, had a very influential role in shaping the American foreign policy agenda. The interventions in northern Iraq in early 1991 and Somalia in December 1992 were considered as cases in point. However, such enthusiasm was short-lived. A series of in-depth quantitative studies demonstrated that these humanitarian narratives were used for self-serving motives and that the US agenda was mostly interventionist and militaristic in nature.

With the planet digitally connected, CNN is no longer the sole prominent international news outlet. Several television news broadcasters currently

transmit in English and broadcast real time 24 hours a day. They include: BBC News (UK), Sky News International (UK), NHK World (Japan), Al Jazeera English (Qatar), France 24, DW-TV (Germany), Euronews, RT (Russia Today), Press TV (Iran), China Global Television Network (formerly CCTV International), KBS World (South Korea), Channel News Asia (Singapore), TVC News (pan-African), Australia Plus, and Australia Channel, among numerous others.

Thanks to the broadcasters' ability to cross national borders, news television has expanded its footprint. Subsequently, billions of people rely on television for their news, worldview, and entertainment. In addition, the ability to communicate with other audiences around the world has become a key indicator for all nations' effective public diplomacy endeavours.

Since the start of the new millennium, Turkey has striven to feature among the world's leading nations, achieving noteworthy progress. Despite the high instability in the Middle East resulting from the wars in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, Turkey has excelled economically and achieved high rates of growth for a protracted period up until mid-2018. In the meantime, Ankara surpassed all expectations by not only hosting high numbers of refugees (four million) on its soil but also by contributing nearly 8 billion dollars to humanitarian aid projects around the world. Such figures placed the country only second after the U.S. in the international rankings, which is highly admirable considering that other wealthier nations failed to fulfil their pledged obligations, let alone exceed them.

In parallel, Turkey became an authentic defender for the causes of the global South, providing humanitarian support to forsaken regions and peoples without expecting any economic returns and most importantly without having a military agenda, as has been, unfortunately, the norm for global powers. Simultaneously, the Turkish leadership has also championed the causes of many developing nations in Asia, Africa and Lat-

in America, which expressed their growing dissatisfaction towards the widening gaps and ruptures in the existing international economic and political order.

TRT World, Turkey's first public international English language broadcaster, was established in May 2015. Based in Istanbul, the channel provides 24/7 coverage of global news and current affairs. It is aimed at a worldwide audience and is broadcasted via satellite, cable operators and across digital platforms. In addition to its Istanbul headquarters, TRT World has broadcast centres in Washington D.C., and London.

In spite of TRT World's relatively recent founding, its impact is starting to be felt. Among the areas that have been given priority in TRT World's editorial line and ensuing coverage is the human dimension of conflicts taking place around the globe. This is why the Istanbul-based network gives more airtime to the plight of civilians. Such exposure exponentially increases when civilians are caught up amidst aggressive urban warfare, when battles take place inside cities, and even more so when massive aerial bombings or random artillery shelling take place. Thus, while many news organisations cover these frontlines from the prism of the dominant discourse, preferring to concentrate on the military and political dimensions, TRT World emphasises the human cost of these conflicts and puts the lights on the human suffering, victimhood, and injustice.

Consequently, TRT World has positioned itself among the very few outlets that champion the causes of the South, avoiding not only some of the stereotypical political and cultural representations disseminated by corporate mainstream news media but also by challenging them. This has led the Istanbul-based news organisation to structure its editorial line, news programs, and running order, airtime allocated, and the number of stories in a way that reflects the angles, perspectives, and stories from the global South. Hence, TRT World has been walking the talk that

many other broadcasters kept trying to achieve but could not. By doing so, TRT World represents a genuine contraflow of information that aims to change perceptions, provide leadership, and participate in setting the global news agenda with the hope that it will bring greater empowerment of the peoples and cultures of the global South.

In this book, some of TRT World's finest journalists, correspondents, newsmakers, and producers have come together to share their experiences in every extremity and confines of the world, giving a voice to the voiceless, providing agency to the defenceless, and representing the conscience of forgotten causes and people. Such an endeavour underlines yet another attempt by TRT World's journalistic community not only to present in-depth and insightful coverage of wars and conflicts but also to bear testimony to the plight of the civilians in these frontlines beyond the newsroom.

The first section covers the Rohingya refugee crisis, in which Shamim Chowdhury, who worked extensively for international television news organisations and covered many areas of the world thoroughly, provides her insights about the tragic trajectory that the Rohingya refugees suffer amidst an engineered genocide. This conflict which has been deemed as a "textbook" example of ethnic cleansing, as per the definition upheld by the United Nations, is a brutal conflict that has shattered millions of lives. Chowdhury poignantly describes the ongoing ethnic cleansing from the receiving end, highlighting the plight of the victims as well as their daily struggle in refugee camps.

The next section covers yet another conflict with a high human cost, namely the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria. Adesewa Josh, who was named one of Nigeria's most influential women in 2019, has a long track record in narrating African stories. She also spent many years reporting critically on the Boko Haram insurrection, revealing its terrible impact on the social fabric of the country. This terror group tried

to play on the ethno-religious rifts in the country and is using a mix of identity politics, religious propaganda, and economic problems to elicit support in the northern part of Nigeria. Josh prospects another angle in this brutal war; one that focuses on the social costs of this insurgency by highlighting the predicament of the girls and young women who are captured by Boko Haram to be used as sex slaves and suicide bombers.

Sara Firth is an accomplished war correspondent, who is accustomed to confronting great dangers and difficulties in reporting from the frontlines. In her chapter, Firth conveys her perspective on Syrian refugees that fled the murderous Assad regime. Around four million Syrian people have now been hosted in Turkey, and nearly all have tragic stories to tell about their relatives and friends who suffered at great length at the hands of the Assad soldiers, foreign militias, and other terror groups such as Daesh. Firth also relates her own account of when she ventured inside Syria, capturing the inherent causes of the conflict, the meek reactions of the international community, as well as the different foreign interventions and their toll on the people in a conflict that has caused at least 400,000 deaths, injured many more, and destroyed millions of lives. Moreover, over 6 million Syrians are exiled overseas, and that is not counting the 6.6 million people displaced within Syria itself.

In the subsequent section, Tanya Goudsouzian, who came to TRT World with substantial expertise in news media in the Middle East and beyond, discusses a critical dilemma facing journalists covering humanitarian affairs. Drawing back from her reporting of the tragedies facing civilian victims in Iraq and Palestine, Goudsouzian dissects the ethical and moral concerns facing contemporary journalists, especially how to avoid the objectification of the suffering victims for the sake of having a "good" story. Confronting this issue has become essential in the 21st century where media has created, in the words of George W. S. Trow, "a context of no context." By doing so, she joins reporter Brent Staples, who argued

in the past that “the modern era takes it on faith that images of suffering stimulate sensitivity to that suffering.” However, he added, these images will more often “normalise” atrocity, transforming the “likenesses of these events [into] a form of brutality in themselves.”

In the fifth chapter, Francis Collings, an international news correspondent with many years’ experience with the BBC and other news organisations, provides a compelling account about his journey to learn Arabic in Damascus in 2009. His description of his time in the Syrian capital is a background to telling the story of the people he met there as the war unfolded from 2011 onwards. Collings describes the trajectory of many of his friends and acquaintances and how the war had a substantial bearing upon their lives, as many have subsequently become refugees in Germany. This story delves into the human connections and societal interactions that are rarely related in any news coverage. Refugees are not mere statistics; they are human beings who lived ordinary lives and who aspire to have more dignified and fair lives in spite of all odds.

Ediz Tiyanan brings another key component to the equation, namely the Latin American refugee flows. Tiyanan, who is an experienced international correspondent, examines the root causes and the complex dynamics of the ongoing migration flux, also referred to as the “Migrant Caravan.” While the discourse emanating from American right-wing groups taps into the fear factor, claiming that the United States is about to be overrun by a horde of terrorists and criminals from Central America, Tiyanan explores the flip side of the coin. He scrutinises the human dimension in this “caravan,” and the fact that it is composed of innocent and helpless people; the most vulnerable of the vulnerable — people fleeing gang violence, political persecution, and extreme destitution.

In the next chapter, Ali Mustafa, an accomplished presenter and international correspondent, provides his vantage point on political conundrums and war zones as well as the resulting and incalculable human cost that is still being paid today. One of the captivating issues that

Mustafa brings to the fore is the impact on journalists who cover these stories. He recently returned from a deployment to Christchurch, New Zealand, where he produced some of the most memorable and moving reports about the mosque terror attacks in that city. One should not forget that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) does not just affect military personnel; it can also be associated with reporting war and terrorist attacks. Mustafa reflects on the question of how reporters can come to terms with being a witness and messenger to events of great suffering, tragedy, and loss. This is a real struggle facing journalists; one that needs to be taken extremely seriously.

Dr Myriam Francois, a writer, broadcaster, and academic who addresses issues typically connected with Europe's "migrant crisis," reveals in her account the plight of thousands of migrants caught up in the so-called "Calais Jungle." While the French authorities did everything to uproot the "jungle" in or around Calais because it might "serve as a rear base for human trafficking rings," the migrants suffered dearly in the face of neglect and improper living conditions. What's more, as put forward by the author, is the language used to depict migrants as a pestilence to be removed. Another interesting angle discussed in this section is an additional dilemma facing reporters, namely how to convey stories without causing "empathy fatigue" or "compassion fatigue," which cause the disassociation and "numbness" of audiences. Francois offers some words of wisdom and thoughts that are very useful in this regard.

In the next chapter, Ahmet Alioğlu, a veteran correspondent who earned his spurs in Gaza, relates the incredibly difficult conditions of covering the wars in Gaza and Syria. In the former case, amidst air raids and incessant electricity cuts, Alioğlu had to keep abreast on all unfolding events. A resourceful man, he tells how he resorted to his car radio to keep listening to useful news and information while preparing his next move. Alioğlu's lines are very edifying on how people live on the receiving end

of Israel's wrath, which stand in contrast with the myth of a "clean" war that the Jewish state's info-warriors are trying to sell to the world.

Finally, Mary Saliba, who has a wide range of expertise covering the Middle East's political, security, legal and humanitarian affairs, provides her insights and experiences about the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Saliba, who has a good grip on the complex, multi-layered, and dynamic nature of Lebanese politics, looked from a human perspective through the prism of culture and togetherness to discuss this hotly debated subject. Her choice of different protagonists allows the readers to understand the magnitude, societal impact, and diversity of Lebanon's current refugee flow.

All in all, this book gathers the inputs that TRT World's journalists are bringing to the fore on this important subject. The fact that these contributions were made outside the confines of the usual newsgathering routines adds more authenticity and value. The authors' diverse backgrounds ensure that each situation is distinctive and every experience is unique. In turn, this underlines the nuances that accompany the debate about refugees, and human movements in general. This compilation of stories in this volume contributes not just to establish context, but also to encourage consequential discussion about this subject humanely and compassionately.

Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui

Manager at TRT World Research Centre

THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS:
A TEXTBOOK CASE OF ETHNIC CLEANSING

BY SHAMIM CHOWDHURY



Children inside the Kutupalong and Balukali camps in Southern Bangladesh near the Cox's Bazaar

Many years ago, I came across a portrait of an unknown old woman, probably in her nineties, wearing a blue dress and a small clip in her hair. I remember thinking that every line etched into her weathered face likely represented a story, not just of a life well lived, but one that also had its share of trials and tribulations. But what struck me the most was the dash of luminous pink lipstick on her mouth, as if, despite everything, life still held hope.

The poignancy of the painting lay in the reminder that the tragically transient nature of our existence is constantly juxtaposed with the overwhelming desire to survive. This hope in the face of the inevitable is part of all of us. The painting left a lasting impression on

me, and I found myself thinking about it again when I visited the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh in autumn 2017.

My first glimpse of the refugees was in September, when I accompanied the Turkish First Lady, Emine Erdogan, and the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, to the camps near the southern city of Cox's Bazar. Just a few weeks earlier, Myanmar had launched a brutal military crackdown in the northern parts of Rakhine state, forcing the exodus of what eventually grew to around 700,000 mainly Muslim Rohingya.

At the time, our team was one of the few international news organisations allowed into the camps, and that was because Turkey had pledged millions of dollars in aid, and the first lady was delivering the first shipment. Our companions—the Turkish national media, members of the Bangladeshi press, and a few international news agencies—were as overwhelmed as we were, as we drove along a snaking dirt track that led deep into the camps, not sure what to expect.

Almost as soon as we arrived, an elderly woman—in a wretched state from her nine-day trek across the border, and from the atrocities she had witnessed and experienced—threw her arms around the first lady's neck and wailed with abandon. At that moment, I understood what it meant to lose hope; the moment when the bright lipstick had faded and all that was left was an abiding agony, whispering menacingly through the sultry breeze.

On that day, the unkindness of fate left its impression all around us; it was stamped onto the beaten faces of the Rohingya men, who stood wrapped in flimsy, sarong-like lungis as they stared in bewildered confusion. It left its mark on the women, their faces covered with the corners of their cotton saris, as if that would somehow mask

the shame of their violation in the hands of the military. It wrapped itself around the bodies of the bare-footed children, bloated and bleary from hunger and neglect.

On this occasion I did not get to hear their stories. Our time inside the camps was short and restricted. But a mere twenty-four hours in Bangladesh did not in any way negate the importance of the deployment. It would be one of the first glimpses the world would get of the plight of the newly arrived Rohingya, and it was the first time many of the refugees were able to receive food and medicine.

This first trip left an indelible impression, but the situation would worsen. A few weeks later, I travelled back to Cox's Bazar, this time for a week, and without accompanying any officials. By then, the Bangladeshi authorities were freely giving visas to journalists. Their embassies across the world had obtained the power to issue them without referring to any higher authorities in the capital, Dhaka. In a stark U-turn in Bangladesh's policy on foreign journalists reporting on the Rohingya—which was in effect a blanket “no” for years—the camps were now swarming with foreign press.

The reason for the abandonment of the policy was obvious. In the past, it was not in Bangladesh's interest to reveal to the world the dire conditions in which the approximately 400,000 Rohingya who had escaped Myanmar were forced to live. But with the numbers now surpassing over one million, the country needed as much attention—and aid—it could get. Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, made her first—and only—visit to the camps just before our second visit, even though hundreds of thousands of Rohingya had been in the country for years. We came across dozens of posters with the words “Mother of Humanity” written in large letters above images of her smiling, aunt-like face.

To be fair, Bangladesh should be acknowledged for allowing in such vast numbers—victims of what the United Nations described as a textbook case of ethnic cleansing. Very early on, the government allocated several thousand acres of land on which more camps were to be built, and a task force was created to deal with the refugees. We also witnessed numerous army trucks and soldiers handing out food and helping with the relief effort.

But in far greater numbers were local Bangladeshis; groups of men who arrived in the camps in rusty, dented cars loaded haphazardly with blankets, pots and pans, sacks of rice, and other supplies. They were everywhere, these unsung heroes—bleary-eyed from having driven across the country through the night, their faded shirts and threadbare trousers betraying their modest means—working day and night under a blistering sun that seemed to give way on a whim to monsoon deluges.

They told us that this was a calling, a duty to help those more in need than themselves. They explained how, upon hearing of the crisis, they collected anything and everything anyone could spare, before taking to the road, not knowing what lay in store. Their contributions may have been modest considering the scale of the disaster, and in comparison to the efforts of the major international aid agencies, but it seemed to us this poignant symbol of empathy from ordinary Bangladeshis resonated more powerfully with the Rohingya than anything else.

We spent most days from morning until nightfall deep inside the belly of the camps, filming and recording story after story. This was how we learn firsthand about the horrors of life in Rakhine, and not just in recent times but for decades. It is well known that the Rohingya have been living in Myanmar for many years, but there is ample historical evidence pointing to their long-standing roots—

going back centuries even, in the region then known as Arakan.

Fate, however, dealt these people a cruel hand. They faced discrimination for years, until finally they were stripped of their citizenship in 1982, rendering them stateless. Myanmar even refuses to use the word “Rohingya” when referring to over one million of these people living in its country, claiming instead they are ethnic Bengalis and therefore belong in Bangladesh.

The refugees we met shared many accounts of consistent and systematic persecution: “When I was young the military used to come just to threaten us,” an old woman, Bodu Zon, told us. “But this year the persecution was unbearable. Really unbearable.” After years of endurance, and after hearing that the army had killed her brother, Bodu Zon finally fled Rakhine, taking her three grandchildren with her.

The stories kept coming: “They don’t let us pray in the mosque,” said Azizur Rahman, a 23-year-old man. “They don’t let us use electricity in the mosques. Only candles are allowed. If we don’t follow their instructions, they burn the mosques. Buddhist gangs always raid our villages. They punish us randomly, even when there’s no crime.”

The Rohingya have been fleeing Myanmar for years, seeking refuge not only in Bangladesh, but also in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and other countries. But the largest exodus took place in 2017. It was triggered by an attack on several police posts by a group of young Rohingya men calling themselves ARSA, or the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, which the Myanmar government says is a terrorist organization. Then came the mighty wrath of the military which, aided by armed Buddhist groups, indiscriminately targeted men, women, and children, burning down entire villages and raping, torturing, and murdering thousands of people as part of its rampage.

“They set fire to everything,” Bodu Zon recalled, “We saw it while we were escaping. We could not bear the persecution and torture any more. They beat us, killed us, and burned our houses. The military was even doing bad things to women.”

To this day, Myanmar’s leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, has never admitted the scale of the attacks. She even went as far as to claim there were no armed clashes, and that the events were merely what she described as a “clearance operation” targeting terrorists. She also said the operation was over by September 5, but we arrived after that date, and on more than a few occasions, when we were close to the border we could clearly see plumes of smoke rising continuously from Myanmar’s side.

The military claimed the Rohingya themselves had set their homes alight. But Myanmar has so far not allowed a single journalist into Rakhine. It has even refused repeated requests from the United Nations to carry out an independent investigation. Without that, there is no way of verifying the events that took place there in the summer of 2017 other than the verbal testimonials of the Rohingya themselves, along with medical evidence.

In the first six weeks or so following the attacks, the Rohingya fled Myanmar in the tens of thousands every day, crossing the border barefoot, taking with them whatever paltry belongings they could salvage. Refugees of all ages traversed treacherous terrain, crossing land, river, and sea, with local Bangladeshi boatmen helping them across in their small wooden boats.

By the time we arrived, the numbers crossing into Bangladesh had dropped. But one day we were given a tip-off by a local man who said some Rohingya were still entering at night. Thus, under a dusky pink sky that warned of looming storms, our car rattled along

a seemingly endless dirt track towards a small path on the edge of a paddy field. We eventually reached a place called Palong Kali, located just one kilometer from the border. We were the only journalists there. At first we saw nothing. Then, slowly, slowly, we started to make out tiny dots of light coming steadily toward us through the darkness of the night.

Suddenly they were among us; hundreds of Rohingya squelching their way single file through the sodden paddy fields and monsoon-swollen marshlands. It was a pitiful sight; men, women, and children of all ages, skeletal and half-starved, some bent over, leaning on sticks for support; their gaunt, contorted faces hinting of their recent past, the hollowness in their eyes betraying both pain and fear.

But what struck me more than anything was the silence that accompanied them, a calmness that was clearly far removed from the serenity that comes with peace of mind. Hundreds upon hundreds of Rohingya were descending upon us, yet the only sound that night came from crickets and other insects nesting among the vegetation. Whatever had taken place a few kilometers from where I was standing had clearly rendered these people mute.

Despite their weariness, some of them continued to trudge further inland toward the established camps. Others, too exhausted to take another step, took shelter in a nearby mosque; some slumped down on its overcrowded lawn. Others made their way towards two out-houses, usually used to store animals. Here, they collapsed on the damp, concrete floor, fumbling through the darkness until they found a tiny spot among the filth and squalor. As we tried to film them, the stench of excrement, urine, and sweat made us choke, while the low moans of the men and women and the weak whimpering of the children played out like the soundtrack to a horror movie.

Back outside and high above, the night sky was interrupted every now and then by flashes of lightening, and a steady drizzle left a dampness that seemed to seep into our bones. A few of the Rohingya spoke of the slaughter they had witnessed. It was a word we would hear often: "We had to take a longer route to avoid getting killed," revealed a man named Yunus. "They kill people, cut them to pieces, or burn them. We saw lots of dead bodies on our way here."

"We haven't eaten properly for seven days," lamented a young woman, Razu Begum, as she tried to soothe the pained cries of the baby that lay in her frail arms while her four other children lingered listlessly nearby. "We finally ate something last night. One of my children found some dried fruit on the way here. My children are hungry and weak."

The local imam told us he had run out of the few supplies that he had managed to put aside, and now he had nothing left to offer them. The refugees had no choice but to wait until help arrived.

The conditions of the camps themselves weren't much better. The monsoon rains left their mark everywhere in the form of thick, treacle-like mud, the colour of caramel and in places.

The refugees were living in flimsy tents made of plastic sheets held together by bamboo that barely kept out the unrelenting downpours. With little help at hand, many of them were building their homes themselves on mounds of loose earth that look as though it would give way at any moment.

Food was scarce. Every day, all over the camp, we saw hundreds of people waiting in line for hours for a ration of rice that would have to last their families an entire week. On one occasion, an aid truck got its tires stuck in the mud. It was mobbed within minutes. Drinking

water was being delivered in large drums, but it was in short supply. Sanitation was nonexistent; flies swarmed around pots of rice before making their way towards open sewage.

On one occasion, we climbed to the top of a hill where a new camp was being built. It was quite a trek. We looked down onto the seemingly never-ending expanse of tents stretched out before us. This was the moment we really started to comprehend the sheer scale of the crisis.

Amidst all of this, the most heartbreaking scenario we witnessed were groups of small children, including many young girls, dressed in vibrant, coloured traditional outfits. We saw them play in the filthy, disease-ridden puddles, squealing in innocent delight, clearly oblivious to the magnitude of their plight. I thought of the old woman in the painting, how the splashes of colour; the pink lipstick and the blue dress could not detract from her underlying sadness. In the same way, the turquoises, magentas and oranges of the young girls' dresses were but a momentary distraction from the reality of their harrowing existence.

We travelled to the local hospital in Coz's Bazar, where the seriously ill and injured refugees had been taken. It was inundated. Two wards had been set up specifically for the Rohingya, but even then, many were being treated on the floors of the corridors for lack of beds.

The injuries were horrific. Among the many victims, we found one woman who had had a large chunk of her skull sliced off by members of Myanmar's military. Another woman's face was so badly burnt that her features could barely be made out. Much of the material we filmed was too disturbing to be broadcast. The doctors told us the vast majority of the injuries were bullet wounds and



Shamim Chowdhury inside the Kutupalong and Balukali camps

fractures. It all pointed to the Myanmar military. One patient, Imam Hussein, was shot in the foot after the army entered his village and opened fire indiscriminately.

"I don't have any tears left to cry," he told us. "The Myanmar army had attacked us many times before, but this recent attack was the worst. When they started shooting randomly, someone got shot in the leg; another person was shot in the head. Fortunately, I took shelter in the jungle. Those who didn't were slaughtered." He told us that his brother had wrapped him in a blanket and carried him all the way to Bangladesh.

Our third visit to the camps was in December 2017, when I accompanied Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim on an aid delivery mission. By then, the camps seemed somewhat more organized and settled, the tents looked slightly sturdier, there were more water tanks, drainage systems had been dug, and we could even see a few latrines here and there. A number of aid agencies had also set up medical centers offering basic healthcare to pregnant women and those with various ailments. Food distribution centers had also established themselves permanently. Agencies including the Turkish Red Crescent and AFAD, as well as others, were daily serving hot meals for lunch and dinner. Yildirim, whom I interviewed inside the camps, told me Turkish charities intended to stay for as long as they were required.

But the camps were still fraught with problems. An outbreak of diphtheria had claimed many dozens of lives, and child marriages had started taking place in order to relieve the burden of parents who had too many mouths to feed.

Towards the end of the year, Bangladesh and Myanmar started discussing a possible strategy to allow the Rohingya to return home.

They signed a deal some weeks later, but to date, the mass repatriation programme has not materialized, not least because Myanmar was unable to give complete assurance that the Rohingya would be able to live in safety and without being oppressed. Also, the issue of reinstating their citizenship, which remains top of their list of demands, had not even been up for discussion. The repatriation programme was supposed to be voluntary, but ultimately, very few people wanted to go back.

The 2017 displacement of the Rohingya was undoubtedly one of the largest humanitarian crises of our times. It was widely described as a genocide, and the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, is quoted as saying: "The situation has spiraled into the world's fastest developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare."

The time I spent in the camps left me in no doubt about what had happened inside Rakhine state, causing the Rohingya to flee. The many stories I heard from the refugees were as horrific and as consistent as their injuries. There is no reason to doubt any of their testimonies. The satellite images published by human rights groups of burnt-out villages and spirals of smoke provided further proof, not that it was needed.

A few Rohingya did tell us they would one day like to return, but only if their rights were assured. It doesn't look like that will happen any time soon. But, as the weeks have become months, and the months will do doubt become years, they cling on to some semblance of hope. Just like the old woman in the painting. They have to, because they have lost everything and hope is all they have left.

WOMEN OF WAR
BOKO HARAM WIVES

ADESEWA JOSH



A malnourished baby and her mother at a UNICEF administered IDP camp in Gwosa

The wind blew in all directions, hurling the cinnamon-hued, powdery dust northern Nigeria is known for, covering Hadiza and Yakura's hijabs. The girls sat idly under a neem tree, peering into the sky through the leaves that shielded them from the blazing sun. It has become part of their daily routine to lounge around this detention camp where girls like them are kept, for some fresh air and a lone conversation with their soul.

What are the odds that the paths of these two would cross . . . again? Both were married off to fighters of Boko Haram as teenagers. They each lived with their husbands in the Sambisa forest, and as faith would have it, they escaped alive—with undetonated improvised explosive devices strapped around each waist. Instead of blowing themselves up and killing thousands of civilians as instructed, they had surrendered to the Nigerian military.

Yakura

With a blue hijab wrapped around her head and draped over her shoulder, Yakura's face was barely exposed, but her fears were evident in the deep contours of her eyes. She looked pale and forlorn, her fingers restless as though she was praying to the gods to change the day that her life changed forever; to bring back the norm of her not-too-distant childhood that was defined by little but love and togetherness with her siblings.

Yakura lived with her family in a village in northern Nigeria called Banki, a neighbourhood of mud huts and thatched roofs. Men would clutch their transistor radio to their ears with one hand, while the other did whatever else was needed. The women and girls walked together in groups and children played in the sand. The once-bustling trading hub, known for the finest sundried tomatoes, bell peppers, meat, and other livestock, attracted traders from far and near, including neighbouring countries like Chad and Niger. All of that was wiped out shortly after Boko Haram launched armed attacks in 2009.

Yakura, her mum, and siblings all ran for safety when gun shots came barrelling down from the skies, letting out such a deafening sound that it disrupted decades of accumulated quiet. Boko Haram rounded-up the men from each household. On their knees, the men were asked to raise their hands in total surrender to the guns pointed at them. The fighters were seeking allegiance to the group's cause, which has since included the creation of a Caliphate and the toppling of the Nigerian government. Men who refused were summarily executed in what has become Boko Haram's signature style.

"My father was one of the men killed on the day Boko Haram at-

tacked our village,” Yakura said, her eyes fixed on the mat she sat on. She traced the edges of the mat, back and forth, staring blankly.

The women, suddenly widowed, fled on foot, some ran as far as the eyes could see. Some were bleeding through the trauma. Boko Haram never used to do much with the women and girls except delight in their misery, but as the number of widowed women and fatherless children grew in northern Nigeria, the group found a new purpose for the lot—abducting them to be used for sex slavery and suicide bombings.

Yakura's mother had heard about girls disappearing after Boko Haram attacks and to protect her teenage daughter, she made a decision to send her off to a safer place. “My mother sent me to Kusiri, a nearby village in neighbouring Cameroon, to live with my relatives because of the fear of abduction,” Yakura said. This maternal instinct had inspired a brave decision, but patriarchy required her to do otherwise. She had to retire her good judgment and wait for the next available man in the family to make a move. In Yakura's case, her fate was rewritten by a man who should have protected her.

Yakura's uncle was not a relative she knew very well, and neither did her mother. The man's claims to legitimate family ties were with the now deceased, and patriarchy demanded that he takes over administration of everything that belonged to the dead. And now, family duty called.

When her phone rang a day after she arrived in Kusiri, Yakura could hardly believe her ears. She was ordered by this man to return to a village that she had fled. “One of my uncles, who was uncomfortable with my mother's decision, phoned and ordered that I return to Banki.” She said he warned that he would “deal with anybody who

opposed his decision. Someone was later sent to bring me back home.”

Patriarchy is typical of the culture in northern Nigeria and there are grave consequences for women who defy it. When a man dies, his widow is passed on to the next man in line after her late husband. Her opinion on choice is not sought, neither is it important. In a culture where men hold the keys to the society, Yakura's mother's unilateral decision to protect her children is seen as nonconforming. And so she surrendered logic and instinct for the rules of the society, in exchange for the great burden of losing her beloved teenage daughter.

A Strange Village

Everything looks different now in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, with military barricades positioned at nearly every kilometer from the airport to the city center. Uniformed men in camouflaged security vehicles patrol every square meter, their guns dangling in all directions. Apart from the people's indifference, this place looks like a war zone, in stark contradiction to the signpost that welcomes first-timers: “Borno home of peace. Islam is for peace. Shariah is Islam.”

Maiduguri was once a regional capital recognized for welcoming people of all religions and ethnicities; a college town long known for its party scene and a vibrant city with a bold, often broad-minded youth culture that—even after almost a decade of war—seemed it could not be extinguished.

This seamless interlocking—of art, culture, faith, and religion—is at the heart of the ideological battle at play in this city, and has flung

far to the rest of Nigeria's northern states. Advocates of religion want faith detangled from this mixture, and extolled for what it is—sacred. In 2009, those who consider themselves custodians of the Islamic faith demanded that the government establish Borno state as an Islamic caliphate, eroding its past while securing its religious future.

Boko Haram was born out of the need to sanitise the city of presumed religious grime, in this instance, of art, culture, history, and sometimes people. Taking to violence and bloodshed, villages were raised and their people displaced. An estimated 35,000 lives have since been lost, while more than two million people remain internally displaced.

We drove through Dalori, Kasagula, Konduga, Kabuiri, all the way down to Bama, where Boko Haram's reign of terror lasted for fifteen months. Men had been butchered in the dozens while in the presence of their families. What's left of the ruins are neem trees and other shrubs at their greenest.

The wind brushed past my ears impatiently as I wound down the car windows to see clearly this place where thousands of people, now either dead or displaced, once called home. The vast expanse of nothingness demanded our attention be on what life must have been like for them when Boko Haram invaded.

Yakura said it felt strange traveling back home to Banki at her uncle's request, and observing all the destruction on the way there. Fear rattled her teenage heart as she struggled to keep calm. Before she could muster the courage to make what could have been a life-changing decision, in retrospect, a call came in from her uncle demanding that Yakura be kept in a strange village. At first she thought it was a transit stop; and "little did I know that my uncle was a Boko Haram terrorist," at that time, she said.

Boko Haram Uncle

There are many Boko Haram sympathisers in northern Nigeria—where more than seventy percent of the population survive on less than a dollar a day. The terror group started off as a religious institution critical of government corruption and offered “a purer version of Islam.” When it proclaimed itself a terror organization in 2009, by declaring war on the Nigerian government, it was readily supported by former members of the religious group. Then came the next surge of membership through religious teachings that promised a guaranteed entrance to Jannah—the Muslim faithful’s ultimate life-after-death nirvana—with virgins waiting to receive the men who would commit to jihad.

These kinds of religious teachings seemed far fetched to me until I got a rare opportunity to interview a former Boko Haram fighter now in military custody. Mustafa Mohammed Bello belongs to what is now known as the Albarnawi section of the terror group. His personal account cleared my doubts: “The reason I joined Boko Haram is because they preached to us that if we follow their path we will be rewarded with Paradise. We followed them, they brainwashed us with their teachings and taught us how to use guns during battles on the field. We used to raid villages and towns, kill innocent people, and seize their properties by force.”

There is the last group of people who joined for economic reasons. According to a UN report, Boko Haram is able to pay its fighters with funds it receives from international and local donors sympathetic to its cause. The report identified extortion, charitable contributions, smuggling, remittances, and kidnapping as ways the group is funded. A woman whose husband is still an active fighter told me he joined because he couldn’t find a job or support his nine children.

It's hard to find how much a Boko Haram fighter earns per month, but similar terror group like ISIS paid fighters between \$400-\$1,300 a month. They are also provided a house, a car, a wife, and fuel, according to the Congressional Research Service. Yakura's uncle was a paid member of Boko Haram who also believes in the group's cause, thus offering his niece as a treat. "He held me hostage in his home for almost one year and married me off to a Boko Haram fighter who impregnated me in Sambisa forest."

I Tried to Escape Many Times

Sambisa forest was once a beautiful game reserve. In the 1970s, about a decade after Nigeria's independence from Britain, the reserve was used for safaris. It had a large population of leopards, lions, elephants, hyenas. It attracted tourists, some reportedly from neighbouring African countries and a few remaining colonial officials could observe the reserve from cabins or safari lodges. The name of the forest comes from the village of Sambisa, which is on the border with Gwoza in the east. The Gwoza hills have peaks at 1,300 meters above sea level that form part of the Mandara Mountains range along the Cameroon-Nigeria border.

We travelled as far as Gwoza on a UNICEF helicopter because the security brief showed that we risked encountering landmines if we drove from Maiduguri. The undulating mountains with hues of serene greenery scattered along its rigid edges would have made Gwoza and Sambisa forest Nigeria's foremost safari destination—now raking in millions in dollars, but for its new occupants.

In 1991, the government of Borno state incorporated this reserve into the national park of the Chad Basin. But it abandoned the pro-

ject following the Sambisa takeover by Boko Haram insurgents in February 2013. The animals gradually disappeared, lodges were destroyed, and the vegetation eroded. Finally, the Yedseram and the Ngadda rivers, which flow through the forest dried up.

Sambisa forest is now Boko Haram's stronghold, the Nigerian military's new frontiere of the war on terror, and was Yakura's home for four years. Her duty as the second wife was to clean and care for her husband, offering her burgeoning body for sex as many times as was required of her. She pondered and planned her escape many times, but the vastness of the forest blurred her waning imagination. "I tried everything possible to escape back to my mother, but there was no way to run," she said. As fate will have it, Yakura's husband was killed in a military raid, which left her with more opportunity to plan her escape. When she finally devised a plan, it was one that would literally take her breath away.

Boko Haram and Using Women as Suicide Bombers

Turns out Yakura was not the only girl quietly planning to flee Sambisa. Hadiza Yinusa was scheming her way out too. The girl had married a Boko Haram fighter at the age of fourteen, following him to Sambisa only to lose him to a younger love. The vastness of the forest gives little room for a sloppy prison break, so needless to say, if caught, they would be butchered and fed to the vultures. But death, they concluded, was a worthy risk.

Although the group used to spare women and girls, leaving them widowed and fatherless after slaughtering the men in front of their families for refusing to join Boko Haram as they did in Bama. Reports of girls missing began making the rounds across villages. Hardly

anyone paid attention until over two hundred girls were kidnapped on the night of April 14, 2014—a feat that brought the terror group international fame. There have been several other abductions since then, locals have told me.

Between April 2014 and December 2015, Boko Haram deployed women and children as suicide bombers. This led to an increase in civilian targeting and resulted in its most lethal and injurious period. The women and girls deployed as suicide bombers often wore the hijab, which became a way to hide explosive devices from victims and the military. The female suicide bombers were able to blend in and detonate before anyone could suspect their intent.

It is widely thought that the girls who went missing from the villages are hostages in Sambisa forest and are the same girls that are now deployed as suicide bombers. Research by the United States Military Academy on combating terrorism reveals that from April 2011 to June 2017, Boko Haram deployed 434 bombers to 247 different targets during 238 suicide-bombing attacks. At least 56 percent of these bombers were women, and at least 81 bombers were identified as children or teenagers.

Hadiza and Yakura watched as girls were strapped with suicide vests by their “husbands.” After a brief, ceremonial talk about meeting again in paradise, they would leave the camp. Like remote-controlled robots, they walked into the wind, leaving behind memories of their brief existence; each one gone forever.

Hadiza is like that of many teenage girls in northern Nigeria—uneducated and from a poor family. Her parents married her off in exchange for financial security. Forty-three percent of girls in Nigeria are married before they turn eighteen. Seventeen percent of underage girls become brides before their fifteenth birthday—many to

men near their fathers' age. The practice is prevalent in the north-west and east, with a combined figure of more than 80 percent of teenage girls become child brides.

Child marriage is an open gig in northern Nigeria, though the constitution opposes it. But the society doesn't seem to frown much at the sight of a young girl just reaching puberty having sexual relations with a man in his final phase of life, and under the guise of a holy matrimony. The rich and the poor practice it, the former armed with money, the latter with an abridged and delusional version of love. Mothers who raise these girls also subconsciously prepare them for the only life they themselves have come to know. Dressing them up as adults, rubbing lipstick on their thin lips and kajal on their eyebrows, as early as age five.

Perhaps what is also aiding this cultural nuisance is the unrestricted birthing spree many northern traditional families are known for. Polygamous by nature, poor or rich, they make more babies than they can keep track of. For the poor especially—the majority of northern Nigeria—sending girls to school is a waste of limited family resources. In Bama village, I met a man who had three wives and twenty-two children. He's a farmer who's comfortable enough to feed his family but has too few resources to offer them quality education. In my opinion, this is the substrate that feeds the Boko Haram insurgency—a massively illiterate population of restless young people swayed by extreme religious values. And may I add that Nigeria currently has the highest number of children not in school in the world.

My own recommendations on ending the Boko Haram insurgency would include rolling out a classified birth control project in the region that would lead to population control. I would conduct a population census to know the number of children out of school and design school projects ensuring basic education. Using a decade

timeline, we would see the birthrate drop drastically, and raise children where they are in an environment less prone to be radicalised.

Unfortunately, this is wishful thinking since those in power also marry underage girls. In 2013, I wrote a report about how a former governor of Zamfara in northern Nigeria, married a 13-year-old girl. Now a senator of the federal republic of Nigeria, Sani Yerima's cohorts defended his decision by claiming that the parents of the girl had consented to the marriage, and his actions were in line with Islamic laws. Many Islamic religious leaders have denounced these claims as false.

Hadiza is now aged twenty-one and has two children from her estranged Boko Haram fighter husband. Reflecting on the last seven years, she concludes everything had been a mistake. "I don't love him anymore and I never want to meet with him again," she said. After a silence moment, she concluded, "what the Boko Haram insurgents are conducting is unethical and immoral, it is not the teaching of Islam. Killing innocent people is not good. They always claim they will go to Paradise, but they will not."

Hadiza and Yakura's friendship developed over several evenings of concocting detailed escape plans. It was a long shot but a shot still. Even if it meant dying, their bodies shattered by an improvised explosive device (IED), the hours leading to their likely death, getting away from their abductors was all they were counting on. Fear that someone will smell their fear, and know the weight that they are carrying under the colourful hijab that mostly leaves nothing to see.

The day they were to be dispatched to their certain death, the young women met and the usual "we'll meet again in paradise" talks took place. Hadiza and Yakura realized they were to have separate missions when they were loaded into separate vans. Their escape plans

were ruined, including the months of courage they had mustered through their brief friendship. Without a chance to say goodbye, they were taken in opposite directions.

Hadiza's abductors took her on a 2.5 hour drive all the while she was strapped with an explosive vest. They drove from Sambisa through Masba, Kama, Konduga, Bama, and Dipchari villages to reach Banki, the mission's destination. This is not how Hadiza had imagined her escape, she told me. But there are few options and previous attempts had failed. Yakura and Hadiza, she explained, "We have attempted to escape on severally occasion, but our husbands will always threaten us that if we escape, the soldiers will catch us and kill us. They said the soldiers will slaughter us and eat us."

When they reached Banki, Hadiza was carefully offloaded from the van. The skies were grey and the shadows of her abductors hard to trace. Her body released periodic spasms causing her to shiver and nearly betray her commitment to the mission (jihad). With a little courage left, she listened attentively to the last set of instructions. She would walk into a mosque in Banki town during prayer time and detonate her explosives. The flattened button next to an assortment of wires clinging to her chest was all she needed to press as soon as she reached her target. She nodded to acknowledge she understood every detail.

Her abductors drove off, leaving her to carry out her assignment. She walked to the dimly lit street meters near the mosque, as the Imam bellowed on the megaphone, and his congregation responding in unison "Allahu Akbar." This is Hadiza's cue . . . and now she is on her way to Paradise.

Paradise

Panic. Chaos. Men are running in opposite directions. Women are cursing and praying in same breath. The crowd is growing bigger. The praying has stopped. The prayer stopped? Not even in hell. Then, this isn't paradise . . . no, not quite. Then who are these people? Hadiza's thoughts rage as they faded.

The street has been cordoned off. Military officers are bent over her, loosening one button at a time, careful not to detonate the explosives. Half alive, Hadiza was hurled into a van and quickly detached from the IED explosives, now placed in a bucket to be studied by the military.

Hadiza regained consciousness in a military hospital where officers doted on her until she fully recovered. After her story was checked out, she was moved to a military detention camp for thousands of women and children rescued from the terror group.

In this camp, there are motherless children, some in need of breast-feeding. There are mothers whose children have gone missing, and there are girls like Hadiza, considered a minor without a home. They are fed and clothed here, but their future or a chance to have a dream is not guaranteed. Still, it is a far cry from the hostage situation in Sambisa forest. According to the Nigerian military, some 30,000 women and children have been rescued from Boko Haram since 2016.

Four months after Hadiza had been transferred to the detention camp, she feels freedom on most days. She can say her prayers aloud and curse the day she took her marriage vows—to a husband who derailed her destiny. Some days, idleness and the restlessness of adolescence kicks in. Casting her mind back to her captivity, she

imagines what the faces of her two boys look like now, and whether she will see them again someday.

One Friday afternoon after prayers, Hadiza saw a rounded figure walk pass by her room, heading towards the kitchen area. The person reminded her of Yakura, and she wondered if she was losing her head. Perhaps, Allah may have answered their prayers after all, and kept the two women alive. She thought, could this finally be paradise? Because the odds of both girls surviving is too surreal. This sighting jarred her thinking, as if she had forgotten something and now wanted to get it immediately.

The shoulders were squared, revealing a small bulge around her waist. "Uhn? Yakura!" Hadiza blurted, as she made her way to the veranda. Facing each other, now, for the first time since they were sent on suicide missions. They hugged and praised Allah. They cried and cursed the men that had altered their lives forever. Their reunion was a spectacle to behold, and the residents of the detention camp stood still for a moment to thank God for their rare luck.

Yakura had been taken to Maiduguri for her own assignment. Her target destination was a market. But since the city is more heavily patrolled by the military than the inner villages, it was easy for her to hand herself over to the officers. An experience much less dramatic than Hadiza's. Yakura received routine medical check up at the military hospital and she found out about her three-month pregnancy. Yakura was detained in a separate military facility, to allow for a full recovery before being transferred to this detention camp.

Now sitting under the neem tree together, Yakura's body was curled-up sideways on a mat and the baby in her growing tummy was at nearly six months. Hadiza sits close to her, picking at the skin on her fingers. Both looked young and lost but grateful to be alive. When I

asked what is next for them, Hadiza said she wishes to prove Boko Haram wrong by getting the Western education they so vehemently oppose. "I want both Islamic and Western education. My husband was able to brain wash me because I had no knowledge then," but now he can't do that, she said.

I pushed further, wanting to know whether she would change her mind for the sake of love and precious gifts. Some women/girls have reportedly returned to their Boko Haram husbands because he feeds them—at best. Most of them have nothing with no one to return to. "I will never want to follow that ideology in future. Even if he buys an airplane for me. I'll never want him again." Her response shut me up at the time. When Yakura summoned the courage to respond to my question, she looked me directly in the eyes and, with a wan expression, said, "My greatest hope is to be reunited with my mother."

Homecoming

But there's no homecoming for anyone associated with Boko Haram, whether as a slave, wife, mother, or surrendered fighter. The community sees them all as representing an enemy of the society. With most communities still reeling from the mayhem unleashed, there a shared sentiment of unforgiveness, protectionism, and reprisal.

For Yakura to return home is to allow her passage to her own death along with her unborn child, the military said. This is the general situation assessment for thousands of girls living in the detention camp. In villages nearby, residents are riding their communities of those who had ties to Boko Haram. They are burned, lynched, or

outrightly discriminated against—including cases where a woman had borne children for a fighter. That is why it is unsafe for Yakura to return home, the military explained when I asked why there were no efforts made to reunite her with her family.

I visited a survivor of a Boko Haram attack and his family in downtown Maiduguri. I had made the trip to learn about the rift the war has left in communities. Abubakar Moduseriff is a man in his late thirties, and has a wife and two sons. Unlike most young northern men, he had a decent job as a trader. He sold bags of onions harvested from farms in Banki and Bama. They are shipped by truck from hundreds of miles down south, where they are resold at a higher price. “I had plenty of money to take care of myself and my family,” he said.

“I travelled to places, going to market for my day-to-day activities by myself.” Sheriff told me as he pointed his cane ahead to assist each step. But Moduseriff lost everything, including his eyesight, three years ago when he was robbed by Boko Haram in Maiduguri. He was shot in the face while he was travelling with other traders to meet customers in a nearby city. Boko Haram ambushed his car, shot everyone, and made off with their money. Only Moduseriff survived the attack.

He spent all of his money on therapy and said he had received no government support in paying hospital bills. His home now had no semblance of having once had enough. I sat quietly by a clay pot that was used as a water reservoir, and I watched him maneuver his way around the one-room apartment he shares with his wife and two children. His wife, Kadija, fed their two sons with a blank emotion that was hard to read. I asked how she is coping and she seems to think Allah knows best. She gave birth to her daughter after her husband lost his eyes; her immediate worry is that Moduseriff will

never see the children grow.

Kadija tends to have bad days when looking at pictures of her husband taken before the attack. Her grief mounts whenever she has to explain to her children why their father has no eyes, especially to the younger son. Moduseriff has refused to give into to self pity. He takes part in a privately run empowerment programme, where he's taught to make soap, shoes, and bags. This new skill will help him start a new business so he can support his family, he said.

He was furious to hear that the government and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) are supporting women and children linked to Boko Haram. Moduseriff thinks the government's priority should be people like him. "And why is the government helping them?" he asked, swiping away flies that try to peck at the red membranes around his eye socket. "I'm the one who needs help, but nobody is helping me. I'm trying to get my life together and feed my family." He said if the government believes this is the right thing to do, he cannot do anything about it.

His sentiment is shared by many victims who now roam the streets begging for alms, widowed or homeless. They have joined a long list of destitutes in a society now increasingly populated by them as a result of the insurgency.

Yakura and Hadisa know that society rarely recognizes them as victims of the war. They would like the opportunity to redefine their destinies, though not, they admit, by undoing their experiences,(because they believe it is their fate and that it is impossible to erase the past) or by denying them. They are women who lived with Boko Haram and bore babies for them; served their sexual needs when they return from battle. They fed the terrorists and made them stronger to fight—none of which was done from a position

of strength. “We are victims too,” they said. The women say they want to raise their children in anonymity, hoping their true identity is never revealed. If it is, they do not want for their children to be judged by a situation far beyond their control.

Now in its tenth year, the Boko Haram insurgency has driven a wedge between the people and their immediate communities, disrupting cultural norms and realigning the core of society. Distrust, fear, and frustration permeates everyday living, sometimes forcing the average person to resign to self pity. Still home to thousands, coping with the aftermath means suspecting every woman and girl, especially those wearing a hijab.

Terror does not end when the gun is dropped or when the enemy is shot. Its impact lingers long after the grenades and artilleries have stopped pounding. The social impact of terror wars like the Boko Haram insurgency are far-reaching, and women and children are the inadvertent victims.

[The author is currently working on a book focusing on women who “married” fighters of Boko Haram, whether forcefully or willingly. It tells of their deep reflections on what led to their estrangement, and their desire to regain the trust of the community they once called home. They desire to reintegrate, yet their attempts to seek forgiveness—if not for themselves, but at least for their children—is the toughest task yet for their deeply wounded communities. These women and children are in limbo, perhaps, for the rest of their lives.]

GAZIANTEP, SOUTHEASTERN TURKEY
A REPORTER'S PERSPECTIVE

SARA FIRTH



Sara Firth reporting at Southeastern Turkey

For all the Syrians who died for freedom. For all those disappeared—some still trapped in Assad's prisons. For the many displaced from their homes. For all for whom the revolution lives on

Fleeing Assad

The road that leads to the Cilvegözü border and crosses into Turkey's Hatay region isn't much to look at. On one side you pass by Turkey's not-so-secret military base, and then the long road, it is just red dust to the border.

At the border you can see the wall that Turkey has built to prevent people crossing from Syria illegally; you see the Syrian mountains on the other side. To the right is a large car park, where Ahmed from Homs, with his friendly smile, runs the small coffee stall and always has a spare cigarette if you have run out.

Most days now it is quiet here. Some days though, buses carrying Syrians who have been visiting family still arrive, and in an upheaval of noises and babies crying, people and bags are all unceremoniously dumped, loudly claimed by waiting family and drivers, and then it's all over almost as soon as it had begun.

Even in wartime people are crossing to see family. Many take the road to Gaziantep—the largest city in the south of Turkey—to try and start over. Some succeed. The people who have been visiting in Syria have usually lived in Turkey for a few years now; they are settling. Two young schoolchildren proudly show off their newly acquired Turkish language skills to me. Others share their stories of sadness, desperation. The horrors of the war we've all seen time and again, documented in excruciating detail for the world to see.

One day a woman walks up to our car where we are waiting at the border. She is crying. She shows us the papers that are the documentation for her son. He's just the on other side of the border, but is not allowed to cross. She tearfully recounts how her husband and some of her sons died in the fighting, and now she works as a teacher in Turkey but she desperately wants her son with her. There is nothing we can do to help. Talking to the border guards brings no clarity, so she will come back and wait another anxious day.

Roughly three million Syrians to date have crossed into Turkey; many are in the country unofficially.

“Things that drive you mad”

Where Fadilah al Sheikh and her sons live, you would miss it in a blink, because it is an unofficial camp just off the side of the road

in southern Turkey. Only a hint of blue tarpaulin seen through the trees gives away the existence of people there.

It had recently been raining when we met Fadilah. Although the sun was out, the ground was waterlogged, and the dense, orange earth had become softened, sticky clay. It was sucking children's oversized shoes into the ground as they walked. One child, who looked about three years old, was waddling in boots a few sizes too big for him, had to have his mother bend down every couple of metres to retrieve his boot in a sad game of stuck in the mud. Other children were in summer sandals, the clay thick between their toes; or they were barefoot.

There is a civilian aid organization visiting on the day that I am there, distributing toys and coats and new shoes for the children. In the story of displacement being played out in southeastern Turkey, the huge numbers of amazing people—just everyday people who have felt compelled to join nongovernmental organizations—helping, providing comfort, is often overlooked.

IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation and Turk Kizilay, the official aid organisations on the ground, have huge aid warehouses that are working hard to provide basic support for displaced Syrians. But they can't stop the Syrian government's bombs from falling over the border.

Fadilah is from Idlib and has been living as an unofficial refugee in Turkey for three years. She came, she said, "when our homes were destroyed. We have nothing, not even money. We eat from the aid provided." Her sons mill around as we talk. She cannot afford to rent a house. "The situation is really bad. Conditions turned from bad to worse in Idlib after the revolution; most of the people came here to Turkey. It is really difficult, for now our children are without schools;

they couldn't resume their education after they left. We witnessed bombardment and houses destroyed—things that drive you mad. My heart is overwhelmed.”

Fadilah's friend standing nearby interjects, “We hope that the conditions will be good and we can return to Syria to see our relatives. Unfortunately, everyone now is in a different country. Some are in Turkey, some are in Lebanon, some are in Saudi Arabia; all of them fled due to bombing. Now the warplanes are bombing our region. Not one of our relatives is left. My father and mother died under bombing. The house collapsed over them; they were pulled from under rubble.”

As we are finishing the interview with Fadilah she starts to cry. As a TV correspondent, someone crying on camera is powerful. Does that sound cruel, filming someone in great distress? If you are a viewer, it is often what will get you to look up. It is raw pain displayed for the world to see. Did it get your attention?

As her tears fell, we asked her why she was crying. “I'm crying on our conditions. For the things that happened to us.” When I'm in Fadilah's tent, so that we can privately remove the microphone clipped to her body, she starts to tear up again. She plucks at the muddy tarpaulin that stands for a wall and gestures around her at the place that for now has to be home. I know I nod; but I don't know.

This was in January 2018. Things have not improved.

The road to Syria—back to the beginning

“The people want the fall of the regime.”

In 2012, while on assignment, I was driving through a Damascus suburb filming closed-up storefronts. It was during a nonviolent protest at the increasingly bloody, Syrian government crackdown on protesters. People had simply closed their shops in solidarity. A man walking along the street saw our camera filming through the car window and he shouted one of the many anti-regime slogans at the time. He shouted it loudly. The Syrian fixer with us gasped, “That is so brave.” We never found out who that courageous man was. I didn’t realize at the time just how bold the act was. What type of punishment awaited those who were caught talking against the regime?

I met Rafat Shehadah early in 2018. He is from Aleppo and was a member of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Syria until he sustained an injury that brought him to Turkey. He now lives in a small house with his wife and children, chickens, and a very playful dog. In the early days of the revolution, the FSA consisted of defected soldiers and Syrians who took up arms to fight back, against the Syrian army. He described the atmosphere of fear that was widely felt, and which had long been documented under the Syrian regime of Bashar al Assad.

“When the protests started, people called for downing the brutal and oppressive regime. One police officer managed to collect all the people in one village, beat them, and force them to prison. We took to the streets because of this oppression. You wouldn’t be able to utter a word against anything; you needed to be silent. If you weren’t, you will go to prison and there everything happens to you.”

Aid was being distributed that day to Rafat's family; toys for his children, a burner for heat in the house. When he sees the provisions being unloaded he gets tears in his eyes. I look away. It is not the first time that I have seen a grown man cry in the course of documenting the war in Syria.

I have written before about the difficulties of aiding Syrian refugees. Responses have ranged across Europe, from the unforgivable disdain shown by many European countries to countries like Turkey and Lebanon that have understood and provided for those at their most desperate. They have called upon other countries to share the burden—and not just financially.

Rafez said, "Thank God, everything is available here for Syrians. The Turkish government is providing medication for free to Syrians, it is comfortable here. But whatever life you have, you would feel homesickness and nostalgia for your home country." These are people who never wanted to be in such a situation, where they are the recipients of aid.

I ask him about what he thinks of the situation now, in 2018—too many armed factions to name, foreign countries including the US, Iran, and Turkey are now operating across the country. "The Syrian people were oppressed by dictators. We are ruled by a criminal. Bashar al Assad is a criminal," he said. "Because he brought militias from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Hezbollah and Kurdish militias, PKK, Russian warplanes; the Syrian people had two options— either to leave the country or die."

What was truly needed from the very start of the war was proper intervention from the international community.

Intervention

"They killed our hopes and dreams."

They call it liberation. The Syrian regime, the Russian military, the Kurdish YPG, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces—all have been fighting to retake territory from Daesh. The terror group has now all but lost its territory in Syria, but the price civilians have paid for that success has been high.

On the Turkey-Syria border I meet a man who wanted to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal. Even at the border inside Turkey, the Syrian government could have eyes and ears surveilling the environment. We arranged to meet him at a different location.

He lives in the southeast of Turkey now with his wife and daughter. In the liberation of Raqqa he lost eleven family members—sisters, cousins, nephews, and nieces. Not at the hands of the Syrian government, but as a result of US coalition airstrikes. "The situation for my family is like many others in Syria, they stayed there because Daesh controlled Raqqa and large parts of the country. The international powers combating terror killed civilians."

He's fierce and quiet when he asked us, "How can the US be fighting Daesh and Bashar al Assad while it's randomly bombing the Syrian people? It targeted Raqqa with artillery and heavy weaponry without taking precautions to protect civilians in their homes who found no way out because Daesh controls the area. But what we saw at the end is that civilians got killed and Daesh got a way out to another places, so Daesh gets recycled."

The UN has said that the US-led airstrikes caused a staggering loss of life during the battle to retake Raqqa and might have even violated international law. In his new home in Turkey he asserted sadly,

"They killed our hopes and dreams."

His young daughter hugged us tightly when we all said goodbye.

Crimes Against Humanity

First came Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan to try and save Syria. It was supposed to be a blueprint for ending the violence. I was reporting on the ground when first the Arab League monitors, and then a UN mission, were deployed. But from the start, the small number of forces deployed, and the continued violence made it clear that this was going to fail. To be clear—it was obvious from the start the political will was not there; not from the Syrian government, the fighters on the ground, or outside political actors.

What the UN mission did do was allow access for journalists into opposition areas where they normally could not travel. The Muhabarat, Syria's secret police, were everywhere. Our driver during this particular visit quietly admitted to me that he was being questioned every night about our actions during the day.

The UN could not explicitly tell us where they would be travelling, so journalists would gather every morning outside the hotels near the UN base, waiting to follow their convoy. On one trip the group stopped in Homs. As the UN observers based there greeted their colleagues from Damascus, we walked a short way into the destroyed city. I asked an old man in a small shopfront how everyone was feeling about the fighting. "Scared," he told me. "Everybody's scared."

An excerpt from a script I wrote about that trip: "The tears he tries hard not to shed perfectly encapsulate the level of devastation that has been wreaked on people's lives here throughout the course of the conflict."

Then it was on to Hama. We were still following the UN convoy when we received a tip-off that the UN were going to Idlib—the north of Syria, where we had heard that all sides were violating the ceasefire that was supposed to be in place. When our driver heard that we were following the UN convoy to Idlib he took his hands off the wheel and refused to continue.

Another group of journalists making the journey kindly allowed our team to jump into their van. Lesson from Field Reporting 101: you might think you're in competition with other networks (and you are), but that should never take precedence over helping colleagues who are also trying to tell a critical story.

Another excerpt from the script of that trip: "We find Idlib under siege-like conditions, a quiet and intimidated city. The sound of gunfire and heavy artillery rings out over Idlib's skyline. What we see is a frightened population and a city—whose symbol is the olive branch, a symbol of peace—is right now a city at civil war."

Just a few months later, Syria's UN envoy, Kofi Annan, quit the role with these damning words about the situation on the ground: "You have to understand: As an envoy, I can't want peace more than the protagonists, more than the security council or the international community for that matter," he said. "My central concern from the start has been the welfare of the Syrian people. Syria can still be saved from the worst calamity—if the international community can show the courage and leadership necessary to compromise on their partial interests for the sake of the Syrian people."

Over the years, an independent United Nations panel has continued to document the ever-increasing number of war crimes. Their reports make for grim reading; it is "newspeak." What they tell is of torture and killings on all sides. Brutal. Repetitive. Unpunished. One

of the panelists, a Swiss prosecutor named Carla de Ponte, resigned in 2017. She said of her resignation, “We are going nowhere.”

“A State of Terror”

The situation at present, as the world talks about a possible end to the war in Syria, is that hundreds of thousands of people have fled right up to the Turkish border in Idlib. There are millions of people in Idlib now. The Turkish Red Crescent has been working to accommodate the influx.

In the space of just a few weeks, early this year we witnessed new roadside camps emerging and expanding along the roads that led to the border crossing.

The Syrian army has forcibly displaced many rebel groups—Daesh, Al Qaeda-linked HTS—to this part of northern Syria. It now feels like a holding pen for militants, which the Syrian government created when they needed a temporary solution to the problem. But among those living there are civilians, and children.

I met Mohammed at a camp run by IHH on Idlib's border, where he had moved with his children after his home in Atarib in the Aleppo countryside was bombed, most likely by Russian warplanes. It was supposed to be a “de-escalation zone,” under what is called the Astana process—a plan drawn up by Turkey, Russia, and Iran to reduce the fighting in certain areas of Syria. Reduce the fighting, that is—not stopping it completely. As one person inside Syria bluntly puts it, the Assad regime and its allies use many loopholes to keep killing people but not so many, and not so obviously.

As Mohammed told us, “we don’t trust any of those agreements anymore.” In his new accommodation in the camp, Mohammed, with his children all around him—one with a wound on his face—tells us about what happened on the day of the strike. “It was just a normal day. Suddenly warplanes bombed us. We were in our house, in a room like the one in which we are here. That room remained intact, but the whole house was leveled to the ground. We were terrified and feared that something could happen to the children. You just couldn’t grasp or comprehend what was happening. My wife put the children in the corner of the room, trying to calm and protect them. There were some injuries on their bloody faces. It was a state of terror; nothing was visible because of the dust, and the children were crying.”

Now the problem for people like Mohammed and his family, and other civilians living in the north, is that large parts of the area are controlled by a group known as Hayat Tahrir al Sham, an Al Qaeda-linked group that has tried to distance themselves from the terror organization. But on a recent visit to Idlib, I observed that men are either dangerously tense with their weapons, or worryingly nonchalant about the power they currently wield.

These are not soldiers; they are militants and intimidated civilians. The groups’ presence and control in the area puts civilians at risk. It gives the Syrian and Russian militaries a pretext for targeting civilians when they are bombing areas.

“Look at these children,” one man in Idlib shouted angrily, after yet another airstrike site in Idlib that we were visiting. “Are they terrorists? No. They are not.” That leaves people like Mohammed, his family, and other civilians in the same situation we’ve seen play out repeatedly over the years in Syria.

Caught in the Crossfire

"It was supposed to be a safe area. Idlib and Atareb were safe zones. We knew there were air strikes, but suddenly air attacks were conducted. There were no terrorists." Mohammed tells us, "Kalashnikov rifles were far from our neighbourhood. There were only children, markets, food, and clothes. There were no guns or any terrorists' position. We no longer trust the peace conferences. We will never be surprised if an area is attacked while we are in it."

These are just a few stories among millions. At least 400,000 are dead. That there is not an accurate figure for the number of Syrians killed so far in this war says so much.

The Unfinished Revolution

A question: How can a country rebuild and have a future before the crimes that have taken place—are still taking place—are fully acknowledged, and those responsible for them are held to account? How can it continue, with the leader that presided over such a bloody revolution still in place?

We've seen it again and again. Homs, Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta. Pain—and not just pain, but documented war crimes, carried out and now etched onto the faces of the Syrians who survived; who now, more than anything, just want the war to end. We know. We cry when we watch the harrowing documentation of the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people over the years. We know, but we do not know.

When I asked about the war in Syria possibly coming to an end, a close Syrian friend told me this: "The revolution, like a soul, will not die. Even if the war finishes. We are Syrians. We are still alive. The soul of the revolution is still alive."

THE OBJECTIFICATION OF REFUGEES:
**WHY WE MUST NOT LOSE OUR HUMANITY
IN SEARCH OF A HEADLINE**

TANYA GOUDSOUZIAN



Children at the Ashti refugee camp, Northern Iraq

In reporting from refugee camps, there is a fine line between raising awareness and treating war-scarred refugees as if they were performers in a circus freak show. – TG

In 2016, while reporting from a refugee camp in northern Iraq, my translator excused herself and stepped outside of the tent. “I can’t do this,” she said, tearfully. “Don’t you see the pain on the mother’s face? Each time she tells the story, she relives the event. I can’t ask her to do it again.”

The mother in question was a Yazidi Kurd from Sinjar whose teenage daughter had been abducted by Daesh in the summer of 2014. The family had not heard from her in two years. Her younger son was still in a state of shock and had not spoken a word since his sister was taken. While he was getting help from a therapist at the camp, progress was very slow.

There were many such stories at the Ashti camp for internally displaced people, on the outskirts of the city of Sulaimania. Each one tragic, each one unique, and each one haunting the days and nights of the camp's 2,800 families.

Shirine Qassem, a 43-year-old Yazidi Kurdish mother of nine from Sinjar, remembered her village, Gerzarek, in flames as she and her children leapt into the truck of the mukhtar (chief) and sped for the mountains. The wife of her son, a Peshmerga, was not so lucky. She was abducted by Daesh and had not been heard from since.

These forlorn tales are great fodder for journalists looking for emotive "human interest" material to complement their war reporting, but one person's story is another's living nightmare.

Sideshow for War Correspondents

In the age of social media, where an article's worth is measured by the number of clicks and likes it receives, journalists covering wars, in their haste to capture a great story, can too often forget that the subjects of their reports are real people with real emotions. Photos of journalists posing with smiling refugee children in rags and plastic slippers in cold temperatures may be well intentioned, but the end result is the objectification of those children. The photos say: Look at me, I am here amongst these miserable people and I am listening to their stories. The photo – like the story – becomes less about the refugee and more about the journalist; exposing the people like subjects in a circus sideshow.

To be sure, the insensitivity is likely unintentional, but it is a consequence of the emotional distance most journalists must maintain in

the midst of war and abject misery, lest they risk losing their ability to report with objectivity. Sadly, however, there is a set pattern.

A journalist will enter a camp and first meet with the director to present a shopping list of desirable interviewees. "We would like to meet with some refugees who have especially compelling (read: sensational) experiences to relate. In other words, experiences that are most likely to shock the reader or viewer. The director will offer: "Would you like to meet a former fighter whose wife was kidnapped? A mother who lost her son? A child who was orphaned? The mute brother of a teenager who was abducted as a sex slave?"

The camp administration is not heartless. Most of the time it hopes the media attention will help engender more global awareness about the plight of their residents and perhaps generate more aid. It will also put the spotlight on their own efforts – as well as affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) – to bring relief to these distressed people. They view the journalists as a vehicle to publicize the stories they live with day in, day out. It is difficult to measure how much the coverage helps the cause, but as a journalist who has been to several camps over the years – also guilty of seeking out the more sensational stories – I am often haunted by the feelings of the refugees after I have left their tent and the camp.

A study conducted on Yazidi refugees published in 2018 revealed that mental problems were prevalent especially among adolescent refugees (or IDPs – internally displaced persons), who were prone to depression for various reasons, including witnessing violent or fatal events. Following their forced migration from their hometown, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other disorders were also diagnosed. Children who experienced forced migration were reported to have exhibited behavioral and emotional problems in-

cluding excessive timidity and fear of being captured. Most children had difficulty sleeping, and over one-third of the children were diagnosed with depressive disorders.

Each time these families are asked to relate their harrowing experiences or answer probing questions by inquisitive journalists and pose for gratuitous photographs, there is the risk of fueling false hopes of rescue from their predicament. Would they not, after all, hope that their tale might inspire a journalist to actually offer them some tangible assistance, possibly fast-tracking their exit from the wretched camp?

Setting the (Journalist's) Stage

Mohamed Al Zaharna has worked as a fixer for Western journalists in besieged Gaza for four years. After the 2014 war, journalists poured in looking to cover the humanitarian catastrophe, including families left homeless and destitute and now living in makeshift camps. Al Zaharna said it baffled him how many journalists appeared to find this hardship insufficiently moving in its original form, such that they felt compelled to exercise artistic license.

"I have many times been asked by journalists to help 'set up' photographs," he said. "They ask for crazy things like, 'Get that kid to climb up on the roof and play with a ball.' Or, 'Move those sofas outside so we can take pictures of the men sitting outside without a roof over their heads.' Later when the photos are published in famous American or European newspapers and I read the captions, I am really surprised at how they can write such fabrications. They just make stuff up."

Al Zaharna continued, “‘Mr. X staring at the ruins of his home.’ It’s not his home! ‘Children playing on a rooftop.’ They are only on the roof because you made them go up there!” He added, “Are the lives of people who have lost everything not miserable enough that these journalists must add indignity to it? Believe me. I am from Gaza. They don’t need to fictionalize it. It’s bad enough.”

For those like Al Zaharna who work closely with journalists and displaced families, the challenge is to calibrate the demands, some of which he calls “just stupid,” with the legitimate and pressing need to raise international awareness at a time of growing desensitization in the West to the plight of “the other.”

For many of the foreign journalists, who come from relative comfort, it is difficult to remember that many of these displaced persons once led quite normal lives. Not so long ago they had homes, they had businesses, and they had cash to spare. Their present condition is not in any way normal for them – they are still grappling with it.

As Al Zaharna puts it: “This man, this mother, these children, they used to be regular people and then suddenly they became poor people sitting in a tent, no belongings and no hope. Journalists don’t understand this, and they beg me to arrange to see them ... they pick their cases like they are at a supermarket. ‘No we don’t want this mother, we want the man who lost his two kids ... We want a home without electricity.’ They make value judgments on whose story is more tragic,” he said.

There have been occasions when Al Zaharna concedes he simply refused to translate what a journalist was asking for, “out of shame.” In one such incident, after a mother finished describing on camera how her young son was killed, the journalist asked Al Zaharna to tell

the woman to repeat what she had just said because the angle of the shot was not quite right.

"I was ashamed to ask her," he said. "She was talking about her son who died in the war. She described how her three-year-old boy – his name was Motasem – was shot and killed in front of her eyes. For the journalist, he was just some kid. For the mother, he was her child, her life. I answered for her. I said she will not do it again. Take two for the camera? No way. He was three years old and his name was Motasem. I don't care if the lighting was not right for the camera. I told the journalist, 'You got your story, now go.'"

One of the most unfortunate consequences of the media coverage, says Al Zaharna, is the false hope that families are fed by the journalists. "When these journalists meet the families, many of them make great promises in order to put them at ease and gain their trust, so they can open up. They make big promises, such as: 'We are going to publish this and the entire world will see and know your suffering and you will get help.' This is a common one." Al Zaharna, shaking his head in disbelief, continued, "But long after the journalists have gone from Gaza, filed their stories, and moved on to some other issue, these families continue to stay in touch with me. They ask me if the journalist is getting help for them and how 'the entire world' reacted to their story... I find myself stuck in a corner. What can I say to them?"

While this may seem a harsh indictment of the media coverage of what is arguably the great cause of our time – numerous humanitarian catastrophes in every corner of the world – it is not to say the coverage must stop; quite the contrary. It is vital for the media coverage to continue, but with media professionals putting less effort in staging "money shots" and scripting stories for optimum

melodramatic effect, and more focus on the actual stories on the ground – perhaps, in the foreground, which can often go unseen and unheard.

The Candy Man

Yet, there are stories to tell that are not motivated by an impatient editor or a dearth of recent “gets”. They are often the best stories to tell; the stories of too-often routine hardships and deprivation. The Candy Man will never see his name in a headline or his shop in an award-winning photograph, but his story should be told.

It was at Ashti camp that I came across 26-year-old Haidar Ibrahim – an IDP from Mosul who was known as the resident “candy man.” His little shack, across the narrow dirt road from the camp’s makeshift school, was filled with all sorts of brightly colored, tooth-decaying sweets, popsicles, chips, popcorn, and drinks.

Every day after class, little customers queued up in front of Ibrahim’s shack to buy whatever they could with their daily allowance. It was a business, yes; but as Ibrahim told me he saw it as something more than a job. It was a community service that served up endless smiles. It might not have been a substitute for a psychologist, but it appeared to make the conditions more bearable for the camp’s children. “These children come to see me at recess every day for a snack or a drink, and some others come from the opposite end of the camp because they know there’s a guy here who will be kind to them and smile at them,” he told me. “All the way here for a smile, can you imagine?”



The Ashti refugee camp in Northern Iraq.

There were 8,000 children among the approximately 2,800 internally displaced families that lived there. And many bore the scars of trauma – some had gone mute, others had recurring nightmares. Ibrahim was seen as a “big brother” for many of these children and, like them, his journey had been difficult.

A member of the predominately Kurdish Shabak community, he fled his hometown of Bashiqa, near Mosul, in the summer of 2014 shortly after Daesh declared its self-styled caliphate there. The Shabak people are an ethno-religious group, most of whom follow Shabakism, a variation of Shia Islam. The size of Iraq's Shabak population is unclear, with estimates ranging between 130,000 and 500,000.

Ibrahim and his brother opened their stand shortly after moving to the Ashti camp from another settlement for the internally displaced. At the candy shack, despite the smiles and sweets, he sees that the children are suffering. “They like to talk, but they don't share their feelings or their problems,” he said. “They come, they laugh a bit and they buy sweets with the little pocket money their parents can afford to give them.” Some are polite, he says, while others have stolen from him. “I'm tough with the thieves, but not too tough,” he said.

Ibrahim's little shack of sweets and the kindness he offered complemented the efforts of local NGOs implementing a range of psycho-social programmes to address the children's traumas, whether art workshops or music lessons. In his own small way, he is making a difference. Why his story has not been told by mainstream western media outlets nor his picture taken, says more about the state of “refugee journalism” than about him.

Old Grievances Die Hard

But even the big stories are not often told. In countries torn apart by war, political settlements alone will not fix antagonism among ethnic and religious groups. For many dealing with the hundreds of thousands of IDPs fleeing battle zones, the reconciliation work must begin in the camps, among the people, to ensure future peaceful cohabitation. Much of the work rests on the shoulders of the administration at the temporary resettlement camps who must cope with the intercommunal grievances that come with the refugees and internally displaced persons.

At Ashti camp, I met a Yazidi elder who had much to say, but he refused to give me his name. Kneeling on the ground, he picked up a stone and drew lines in the sand to demonstrate how Daesh fighters entered Sunun, a small town in Sinjar two years earlier. "They came from four directions," he gestured. "They had tanks, RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] and everything. All we had were simple old weapons. And there was only one road left for us to take, and that road led to the mountains. We took our rifles, our women and children, and we ran." He said it all began with a terrifying phone call he had received around midnight from one of the nearby villages that had been overtaken by Daesh in August 2014. He was told, "We have been betrayed. The Peshmerga have all gone. Nobody is coming to help us, run to the mountains." He added that the Iraqi army had left the area just two months prior.

The residents had fought for several hours from their positions in the mountains until they ran out of ammunition. Some 50,000 Yazidi Kurds had fled to the Sinjar mountains and were stranded there for months before the United States conducted air strikes in the area. It was August and it was scorching hot. Some seventy children

reportedly died of starvation and dehydration. Many of those who were not able to escape to the mountains were either killed or taken captive by Daesh, including more than 3,000 children; as many as 7,000 women were abducted.

This Yazidi elder was now a teacher at one of the makeshift schools at the Ashti camp, which was divided mostly between Yazidi Kurds and Arabs from Anbar, Salahuddin, Sinjar, Shingal, Fallujah, and Mosul. Tensions between the two groups inside the camp had some fearing that reconciliation would be long and complicated. There was fear, anger, and almost no social interaction between the Arabs and Yazidi Kurds. It is clear that the trauma from this conflict will not be easily overcome, especially in such close and difficult living conditions. The Yazidi children were more traumatised than the others, and they stuck together. They were more reluctant to mix, and the behavior of the adults certainly did not help.

Some Arabs deride Yazidi Kurds as “devil worshippers,” while Yazidis are known to be a close-knit, exclusive, ethno-religious group that shuns interaction with “outsiders.” At one point, according to a camp administrator, all of the Yazidi children suddenly dropped out of school because of the interethnic tensions. “We reached out to the influencers in the Yazidi community - their leaders, as well as the sheikhs of the Arab communities, and asked them to persuade the adults in their communities to not discuss these issues in front of their children, and for them to not to refer to each other in derogatory terms, at least not in front of the children,” she said.

KSC (Kurdistan Save the Children), a UNICEF partner, is implementing “child-friendly” areas in five camps. These involve the schools, sports activities, and art workshops for internally displaced children. One of the teachers for the KSC-run schools is Mohamed al-Al-

wan, aged 43, an Arab displaced from Salahuddin. He has been at Ashti camp since January 2014.

He shared his own experience that brought him to Ashti. "ISIL entered the city and we were suddenly cut off from everything," he recalled. "We had no telephone, no gas, no food. We had to gather roots to cook or else we would have starved." Then the Shia militias arrived and there was fighting between ISIL and the militias, he said. Al-Alwan remained in Salahuddin for five months before he was finally able to flee with his wife and thirteen children. He says it was not too difficult to escape, "because ISIL was too busy fighting the Shia militias, and the population was so large that it was hard to control the outflow."

The tensions between the Yazidis and the Arabs in the camp were very high in the beginning, Alwan says. "It was challenging to deal with, but we are teaching the children that we are friends, we are part of the same country, and we make an effort to mix them up in activities so they are forced to interact."

Shirine Qassem, a 43-year-old Yazidi Kurdish mother of nine from Sinjar, recalls seeing her next-door neighbour joining the ISIL fighters. "My neighbour was an Arab, and they betrayed us and started fighting against us. We used to celebrate weddings and have parties together. Then the next day they put their hand into ISIL's hand. How can I ever move back there again? How can I trust them again?"

Qassem said that she would like her children to attend school, but she claimed they were afraid because many of their classmates would be Arabs. The Yazidi elder interjected, "But we don't have a problem with Arabs. These people here in the camp were not living in our area. These people are like us, chased away from their homes in Salahuddin, Diyala, Anbar. They were not the ones who did this

to us.” Sadly, stories like this are numerous, but without a picture to show or a significant tragedy to report, few media have the inclination to bring this to print, to video or even to electrons on a website.

The Journalist's Quandary

So, this is the quandary faced by journalists. As a colleague told me, stories in this milieu “need to bleed, have a lot of bang-bang or have a picture of a blue-eyed Arab”. And this presents both a paradox and a rationale.

The paradox results from the modern proliferation of information. In the old days, a few large periodicals and media outlets owned a monopoly on the information and the public's eyeballs. The International Herald Tribune, Le Monde, Reuters and the wire services obtained – and to a great extent controlled – what the world saw in tragedies ranging from Biafra to Bangladesh. Today, the information monopoly is broken and information democratization (some would say information anarchy) is the norm. First came the satellites, then the cable channels and now the cellphones. And herein lies the journalist's quandary – how does the established (some would say the outdated) media compete against a story, often unverified, which ends up on a blog site, Facebook or Twitter? How do “old-school” journalists compete against a cellphone with a camera and WhatsApp when they have to check, write source and double-source their stories?

And this paradox also explains the shutting down of expensive overseas bureaus, the reduction in accredited journalists and the move away from paper-based periodicals. Subscriber numbers and advertising revenues are down and the competitive pressure to show even a minor profit means that budgets are slashed to the bone. The Washington Post may say “Democracy Dies in Darkness”, but it takes money to keep those noble lights on.

This further explains the rationale for producing only the biggest, most unique and most photogenic stories. While many would like to, there is little chance that journalists can seize the opportunity to accurately “write the first chapter of history,” so long as bureaus press for the best photo, the best story, or the best quote to attract an audience whose eyeballs (and wallets) are being pulled in every direction by cable channels, websites, Twitter and Facebook. Sadly, the real stories – whether ethnic disputes or intra-camp dynamics – may not be so marketable and end up in niche publications that do not reach mass audiences. This in turn only fuels stereotypes, misinformation, and a tendency to generalize the unique and tragic experiences of many thousands of refugees and displaced persons. Worse still, it further dehumanizes an already disenfranchised and marginalized segment of humanity.

The stories that we need to tell as journalists are those that challenge preconceptions and comfortable “truths” about “backward nations” seeking assistance and support. In short, they are the stories that are not as appealing. They involve taking the time to listen to people we may dismiss as “irrelevant” or “uninspiring” at first glance because they do not fit a more dramatic narrative. Less behind the camera directing and more *cinéma vérité* – documenting real life in an honest presentation – is the solution.

A better understanding of these problems can lead to better solutions. As long as our professional environment is shaped by the new proliferation and democratization of information, we will be compelled to focus exclusively on acts of violence and shocking events, stories that reaffirm stereotypes rather than break them, or narratives that serve a political agenda, the long-form individual human interest story or clickable photo montage. The real stories will be missed, and journalism will continue to suffer.

MY REFUGEE MY TEACHER

FRANCIS COLLINGS



Aliaa and her husband Mohamed

We sat outside of Aliaa's small house, flicking through the pictures on my laptop, pointing at faces, exchanging gossip about friends – something we had done many times before. Normally, it would have been on a patio or terrace in Damascus, with the sound of the Mu-ezzin in the distance, but these days it is in a quiet town in southern Germany. Aliaa had led quite a life since we last met.

The photos always showed us smiling – at a party, a wedding, or at someone's house watching a World Cup game while cooking kebabs on a barbecue. There are images of us sitting at desks covered with Arabic textbooks, and even one where we are on a rickety bus with friends heading through the desert to Palmyra. The pictures of that trip produced most laughter – especially one of a mutual friend who, not for the first time, climbed onto the roof of our fast-moving bus. We had only got him back inside the bus when we spotted a Syrian police checkpoint ahead. Those were innocent days.

“Remember that? Seven years ago now... Raya is in Sweden these days, Abed lives in London, George has stayed there.” There was an air of sadness, too. I was just a visitor who had lived in Syria for a year and half, and these were places that held great memories for me. For Aliaa and her husband, Mohammed, it was home. Now living in sanctuary after a brutal journey that nearly killed them, they looked back to a homeland that they may never see again.

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I went to in Damascus in 2009 to learn Arabic, taking a sabbatical from my job at the BBC in London. Having learned to speak Spanish relatively well in recent years, I knew Arabic was much tougher and would take far longer, so I had given myself a year at least. Like many efforts undertaken before, I had no idea how difficult it was, or how rewarding it might be.

I had made prior contact with the University of Damascus, which offered courses “from zero” as they told me, for people with no knowledge of the language. However, after finding somewhere in Damascus to live, with a family in the backstreets of the old city, I soon realised the university course was not going to work out after all. I was in a class with people who had studied the language before and it was not remotely tailored to a starter like myself, so I started looking around for another solution.

A friend who had a berth in another house knew of a private teacher and she made the connection. Over coffee, after about thirty minutes, Aliaa had explained more to me about the rudiments of the language than I had gained in two weeks in the classroom. I learned about the root structure, how the baffling letters changed shape depending on where they were in a word, but Aliaa also imbued a love of the language.

She showed me the beauty of the writing and had me scribble the letters and words. As a right-handed journalist whose once-neat script had been reduced to an impenetrable scrawl after many years of fast-paced work, I was creating beautiful shapes and writing in the opposite direction, from the right side of the page heading left. It felt easy and fluid. What is more, I liked Aliaa.

I had found my teacher, but what I did not realise at the time was that I had gained a true friend.

Each morning I would wake up early and read through the two-hour lessons we had the day before. Aliaa would arrive, make tea, and smoke her incessant cigarettes while banished to a far corner of the terrace, and then we would sit down and plough through vocabulary and grammar.

"Today we are studying politics," she would announce, and then we would lower our voices as we discussed terms like government, democracy, dictatorship, and whisper the words "Israel," or, as we called it, "Disneyland."

I reciprocated the teaching with an hour or so of English study, although she already spoke it surprisingly well, having been mainly self-taught. More than verbs and vocabulary, Aliaa introduced me to a life that I may never have seen, to the ways and mores of a kind and generous people. How to make sense of the baffling mini-bus service that ran irregular routes all over Damascus. What was the best food to order and where? Even how to haggle in the Souk Al-Hamidiyah. "Walk away, walk away," she would whisper. "He will follow."

It was all one large field trip, often taking the Arabic out of the classroom and onto the old streets of Damascus. We were at weddings in

Yarmouk (later to become a Daesh stronghold), parties in Mezzeh, and we had our lessons everywhere. So difficult was the language, and yet so much fun was the life there, that I extended my time. But in my second year, life started to change around us. It was a gradual build-up to war, beginning with the police brutalising teenagers who had spray-painted a wall with anti-government graffiti in De'raa, in the south of the country.

Then the police began to shoot at protestors. Like all governments who shoot unarmed people, they claimed they had been attacked by "terrorists," but it was a display of ruthlessness that was very concerning. De'raa seemed like a terrible incident, a period of tension that would be quashed as others had been before. We never imagined quite how evil it would become.

Gradually the neighbourhood where I was living became less friendly. Quiet, somewhat sullen men in leather jackets occupied street corners and would stare as you passed. "Who are they?" I would ask shopkeepers I knew well and often chatted with. "Police," I was told, very quietly.

The demonstrations I saw in Damascus were pro-regime. More than once I was caught up a vast throng of people shouting: "Allah, Sou'reeah, Bashar ou bas" – God, Syria, and Bashar al Assad is all we need. It reminded me of being on football terraces in the north of England in the 1980s, but I knew these were dangerous times.

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I left Syria very reluctantly. Back in London at my job at the BBC, Aliaa and I spoke often on Skype or by phone as things worsened. Neighbourhoods I had known well, like Yarmouk, were devastated. Masakan Barzeh, where I had lived for awhile, was attacked by

tanks. Day by day, familiar towns and cities were succumbing to the horror of brutality against anti-regime protesters, with the constant refrain from the regime of “terrorists.” So-called political extremists who had been jailed by Assad in the years before, were released, allowing the regime to justify their claims.

Aliaa was at first reluctant to leave. Syria was her home, she was originally from the north, but Damascus was her place. “I’m staying here,” she would say, and more than once she said quietly, “Once this is all over it will be great, there will be a haffleh’ using the Arabic word for party. I kept telling her she should leave, that there would not be a party, and that if the Assad regime fell, as we expected then, there would be fearsome bloodletting.

She kept me informed of the growing influence of the Shabihah, meaning ghosts or shadows; the government-linked militias that now controlled the streets in certain areas. How dark it was all becoming. The one thing that really struck a chord for me was some time in 2013, when Aliaa said that the cats were quiet, she rarely heard them. The famous Damascus street cats who would keep you awake with their yowling, were now subdued and mostly silent.

Eventually Aliaa, like so many others, would leave. First to Beirut to work as a journalist, and then to Istanbul as a refugee. She became one of the many – one of the 5.6 million Syrians exiled overseas, over 3.5 million in Turkey alone. And that is not counting the 6.6 million people displaced within Syria, according to the UNHCR. This is the tragedy of our times, one that made people like Aliaa and Mohammed risk their lives to escape.

More than once Aliaa spoke of heading to Europe. One day she mentioned in passing they may have found a possible way, but she was economical with the details, telling me that if it happened, they had an “official boat,” but it was “nothing to worry about.” I was not

the only one that she did not tell when she took the boat; her family had no idea either.

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Two years later we sat outside of her home in Germany as she took me through the details. We watched the footage that she had filmed of Mohammed and their friend Tarek, happily walking the streets of Izmir in the south of Turkey, laughing and shouting. They were heading towards what would be an overcrowded boat that would take them across the Aegean to Europe. As we watched, the video became more harrowing.

These were pictures that by then were familiar to me, to the world, of desperate men, women, and children clinging to rubber dinghies that sat low in the water. Except in this case they were friends of mine, reduced to a desperate gamble. "You don't think about the risk you are taking," Aliaa told me as we drank tea. "But the moment the smugglers said, 'To the boats,' is where the drama started." One hundred and fifty metres offshore, the smuggler steering the packed boat dove overboard and left them alone at sea in the dark. Shortly thereafter, the engine failed and it seemed very bad. The video shows flickering lights, and you can hear panic rising in Aliaa's voice shouting in English. "Hello!" she shouts as another boat approaches. "We need some help here!"

As I sat and interviewed her for a TRT World report about the journey, she spoke emotively of the experience she thought they might not survive. "I was thinking of all you guys, my friends and family. I was saying if I had done something wrong to someone I hope they will forgive me. I was just cleaning my heart," she said.

By chance they were spotted and rescued by the Greek coastguards. The pictures show beaming faces, out of relief more than

anything. The next two weeks I did not hear anything from her, no one had. We had heard they had made it to Europe, but no more. I was annoyed she had not been honest about the dangers, but I realised she was just trying, as ever, not to worry anyone. We hoped all was well, but nothing about what has happened to Syria – to places we loved, or to friends – was really surprising anymore. The Syria of smiles and laughter we knew before the war was now a mirage, it no longer existed.

Aliaa, Mohammed, and Tarek landed in Athens and then managed to make their way slowly through southern Europe. They paid smugglers to take them on a tortuous overnight hike across the mountains from Albania to Kosovo while keeping a lookout for bears – the journey took over ten hours. The rucksacks they had brought from Turkey were slowly shed of their weight and items deemed unnecessary. Carefully, they made their way across borders by foot, car, and train, avoiding the police as they went, or anyone who would turn them back. Germany was the goal, and it was once they were in Munich that they resurfaced to let us know that they were fine, if exhausted.

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Soon after, I went to see them. They were in a quiet town, crammed into a room in a small block of flats that were reserved for refugees. The language spoken was Arabic, you left your shoes at the door, and the smells of Iraqi and Syrian food permeated the air. It was their first stop as they entered the refugee system the German government was establishing to help the new arrivals.

As we walked around the town one warm day, the calmness of the

place struck me. I had not seen Aliaa in over three years. She was, on the outside, the same person, running and skipping towards the train station where I arrived, shouting “Merhaba” loudly from across the street. But the Damascus we had both loved was a heaving maelstrom of activity, noise, and chaos. Aliaa herself had the same characteristics at times. This place on a beautiful river, not far from Stuttgart, was the complete contrast. Quiet, reserved, and of course very Germanic. I wondered how they would fit in.

I was back a few months later when friends from all over convened for a boisterous and entirely typical Syrian wedding. Aliaa and Mohamed were then married, loud Arabic music pumped out all night long as once again the Syrians taught the *ajanib* (foreigners), myself included, how to dance the traditional Dabkeh, as we had done many times in Damascus, Homs, and Palmyra.

Except this time they were the foreigners – or as the Germans would call them, *auslanders* – making their way in a strange land, as we once did with their help.

What Germany has done for refugees warms me, but I also see it as a basic human obligation, to help others as they would help you. And I have rarely met more generous, open people than the Syrians. For many, my friends included, Germany became the sanctuary that America once was to previous generations of desperate people. Those close to me who have their family histories scarred by what Germany once was, of Nazism, concentration camps, and the Holocaust, now see Angela Merkel and the current Germany as a shining beacon.

Germany has created a system that will yield dividends. By nature, the Levantine people are hard working and innovative. The decisions of Merkel in giving over a million people a refuge, may yet

prove to be far-sighted. As an English citizen, albeit it someone who has lived many years outside of Britain, I feel ashamed at the way my country treats refugees. The fifth-largest economy in the world has accepted a paltry number of Syrian refugees, barely 10,000. By comparison, Turkey has accepted over three million people.

The only thing I can offer to foreign friends who ask about this, is to remind them that Britain is an island, with an island mentality and a history of being invaded – and doing a heck of lot of invading themselves. Unlike in continental Europe, the borders were rarely fluid. I may be wrong, but despite immigration and a multicultural Britain, there seems to be a form of inbuilt xenophobia in England, one that is easily exploited by right-wing media and scare-mongering politicians.

I do not write this thinking everything has been wonderful for refugees once they have found a home in Germany and elsewhere. For every Aliaa, Mohammed, and Tarek, who are clever and worldly enough to assimilate and learn languages, there are others who will always struggle. Those who will not be accepted, who will always look back to a life before the war in Syria, and who will be called “auslander.” I do worry terribly when I hear of attacks on refugees.

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Frau Wolf is a social worker that has been looking after Aliaa and Mohammed since they arrived. They have thrived, and within two years they were speaking German at university level, but not everyone succeeds like this. As we spoke in her office, Frau Wolf explained the difficulties. “The expectations of the refugees who arrive in Germany are too high and unrealistic. They are expecting to get a private flat in a couple weeks and find a job quickly that they can lead in their home culture. This is the ideal vision they have, but

this, of course, is very difficult.”

These are, after all, people who have had to leave everything behind. Jobs, families, homes, a culture, and all they have known. To arrive in an alien country, learn the language, fit in, and thrive is an immense challenge. It is one we all hope does not happen to us because of war. Both my parents lived through the Second World War as children, my grandfather fought through the First World War. I have a photo of him with three school friends who all signed up to fight on the same day in London. He was the only one of the group who survived and returned home. I am part of a blessed generation of Europeans who have not had to go to war or become refugees in a foreign land, and it is something I have taken for granted.

And yet my friendship with Syrians, who are now scattered, has taught me that there is no difference between the likes of myself and Aliaa, apart from my passport. My place of birth has given me chances and, ultimately, protection. She is from a country that has been essentially reduced to rubble, and which is still led by a brutal dictatorship that will readily kill its own people today, just as it did in De'raa early in 2011.

Aliaa and Mohammed are in a good place. They seem happy, and when I last visited the barbecue was fired up and the kebabs tasted just as good as the ones we used to cook. They miss home and their families, but recently they had their first child. Germany, a country that knows the pain of war and destruction, has allowed them to start again and have a future. It is also a place that will give their daughter a far better chance in life, and much more security than they could have in Syria today.

THE MIGRANT CARAVAN:
**THE STORY OF CENTRAL AMERICANS
FLEEING GANG VIOLENCE...**

EDİZ TIYANSAN

1- Arduous Journey

“Would I make my family go through this, if it wasn’t a matter of life and death?” asked Solomon, while shaking his head in response to his own rhetorical question. A soft-spoken devout Christian with two children, Solomon said his priority was a “dignified life” for his family and he was convinced Honduras could no longer offer that.

I met him in November 2018 in Mexico City, nearly halfway into their seemingly never-ending journey to the US-Mexico border. Over the last three weeks, they had smuggled themselves across



Dina feeding cough syrup to one of her children at the tent where they slept for several nights in Mexico City.



several borders, walked hungry for hundreds of kilometers under scorching heat, spent freezing nights on the streets and got sick multiple times as they made their way as part of a caravan moving across Central America along with thousands of other migrants, most aiming to seek asylum in the United States.

They move in convoys of hundreds to facilitate a journey, which could otherwise be extremely dangerous. Central American countries and Mexico have earned a reputation for being precarious even for their own citizens' safety.

Many travelers in the past have died on the same route —some were mugged, some kidnapped by cartels... The risks are too many for any family to consider undertaking this journey entirely on their own.

"Pueblo sin Fronteras" (also known as, "People without Borders") is an NGO that has been organizing similar caravans for several years. They carefully pick the travel route in order to avoid the cartel-dominated zones as much as possible and make sure to keep migrants on the road only during daylight hours.

One day, as we moved along with the caravan in the Mexican state of Veracruz, an incident that took place nearby left a chilling effect on all of us. An armed group from a local cartel entered a restaurant where a local elected official was having a meal with colleagues. Gangs asked him to go with them. When he refused, he was shot dead on the spot.

Kidnappings are a common place as much as the killings of politicians and officials. And the target does not always have to be high profile. Cartels make profits trading drugs, arms, and favors, but at times, even poor migrants may be considered profitable —since

their relatives could be forced to pay cartel members in another country.

Some areas were considered particularly risky, so the Mexican Police decided to establish a presence along the migrants' route, at times, even escorting them with their cars. In one such instance outside the city of Cordoba, I asked a police officer whether there was any specific threat. He explicitly warned that they were taking precautions because "anything could happen, any time of the day."

It was in that state of mind that thousands of migrants pushed their way north, constantly worried about their safety. Adding to that was the worry of having enough food and water to outlast the extreme conditions. Everyday proved to be yet another struggle, mentally and physically.

Migrants in the caravan often take their strength from their numbers and manage to survive its hardships through solidarity. On cold nights they huddle in groups and during the day they share the little stock they have to last the long march. They take turns carrying babies and the carefully-chosen belongings they decided not to leave behind. Knowing that memories they hold on to from their previous lives could make their future lives harder to reach, they took with them as little as possible.

Their multitude in numbers could also mean trouble at times, with one person's flu spreading like wildfire among the group. Nearly everyone had got sick at some point.

It was the chronic hunger and sickness that made the journey particularly hard - casting occasional doubts on whether they will ever make it to the United States. Fatigue coupled with extreme conditions made it harder to recover from any sickness. But most mi-

grants were convinced that there was no other alternative, and this collective conviction kept them moving forward.

On many of their stops in Mexico, local authorities or residents provided food, water, and medicine. Other times, they were not so lucky. For many, going to bed hungry was nothing new. Not taking showers or not having a mattress to sleep on had also become the ordinary. After all, tough conditions were not that hard to overcome for a determined and resilient crowd of migrants, dreaming of a better life.

The migrants' longest stop was in the Mexican Capital. For over a week, Mexico City's largest sports complex was turned into what looked like a make-shift refugee camp. Tents hosting over a hundred refugees each, were scattered on a vast space of baseball, football or athletics fields. The sheer size and capacity of these facilities reflected on Mexico's reputation as the largest city in North America.

After spending days on the road, settling in a temporary shelter helped boost migrants' hopes and morale. For most, it was the first time in weeks they were granted some relief and areas an opportunity to shower wash clothes, and have access to hot meals served all day long.

They even had a stage built for entertainment. Throughout the day, massive speakers blasted songs known to all Latinos, no matter where in Central America they come from.

One afternoon, the stage was converted to a boxing ring that featured costumed "super-heroes" throwing fake punches and kicks, as an exhilarated commentator yelled amplifying the dramatic effect. An odd scene at first sight, it seemed to catch the interest of a

crowd who told me this was the first time they got to laugh things off over the last few weeks. It was then that I realized that humor, too, was scarce, and that it was just another one of those needs that relieved their minds and bodies.

Donations flew in like no tomorrow. What used to be the car park of the city's largest sports complex was now only open to official cars and journalists. Many Mexicans who brought second-hand clothes and donations had to park outside and walk a fair distance to be use-ful to the people they empathized with over the last few weeks.

The migrant caravan had been all over the news since the day it first reached the Mexican border. Anti-riot water cannons had dispersed a horde of migrants rushing to cross the border at first, only to allow them to cross in an orderly manner over the course of few days.

Migrants' gradual advance through Mexico had been closely monitored by several local TV stations. The US President Donald Trump's increasingly harsher rhetoric ahead of the US mid-term elections, carried the group's plight onto international headlines. "They will steal your jobs and create chaos in your communities," Trump had said in rallies in an effort to galvanize his support base. But it also led to the empathy of some, who otherwise might not have known about this mass exodus.

Mexico, too, had mixed reactions towards the group. A father and son brought bags of used shoes and clothes to one of the "donation tents" in the capital. "We wanted to help in any way we can," the father said. They had collected unused items in their neighborhood, hop-ing to facilitate the long remaining journey for these travelers. "We hope they can make it to the border," his son said. Despite his young age, he appeared to understand the harsh realities in this country.

“What if they don't make it and end up staying?” I asked. The father and son looked at each other and shrugged. They said Mexico already has many migrants and a whole set of its own problems. They weren't necessarily opposed to Mexico hosting them, but they were skeptical of their country's capacity to host more Central Americans than they already do, in an economy that doesn't meet the expectations of the average Mexican.

The migrants agreed. Many of them knew that they could ask for asylum right here, right now. But “what's the point,” they thought, as it would not be a whole lot better than what they've left behind in Honduras, Guatemala, or El Salvador. Not for the economic prospects, nor for their safety.

The same cartels they fled in their countries are often active in parts of Mexico, as well. So their primary goal is to make it all the way to the United States, where they thought they would have true protection and better prospects for making a living —dreams that kept them motivated no matter how arduous the journey became.

2- Worth it?

As a journalist, it was interesting for me to see first-hand the conditions these people are willing to endure in order to change their lives. It makes me wonder whether I would do the same if I was a Honduran living in the communities they've left behind. And I wonder how bad the situation is?

The truth is that true struggles of lower-income Central Americans have been underreported across the world. It is easy to assume, just as President Donald Trump has previously done, that these people

are “economic migrants” who are simply looking for prosperity, or as some refer to it, the “American Dream.”

Once you scratch the surface of their stories, it soon becomes clear that “safety and security” is also a major factor that goes into the tough decision of leaving everything behind for a journey that offers a lot of uncertainties and no guarantees.

That’s why many people are afraid to speak up on record. Knowing that they might be ultimately forced to go back, and once again live at the mercy of cartels that dominate their neighborhoods and cities.

Several youngsters I’ve spoken to have told me that their primary motivation for leaving was to escape gang violence. Among them was Fernando -who had recently turned 18 - who had to make an almost-spontaneous decision to leave behind all his family and friends in Honduras.

Fernando’s options were clear: either stay and join the gangs, or escape. He told me off-camera that many youth are forced to join the ranks of the cartels or face the consequences.

It was a similar ordeal for Marvin, another Honduran in his early 20s. “My life had turned upside-down overnight,” he said to me, still outraged at what had happened to him only weeks ago.

As a young Honduran, Marvin had considered himself lucky to have a job. But working as a security guard for a big private firm made him an ideal target for the cartels. One night, gangs followed him all the way to his home, barged in, and threatened him at gun-point in front of his family: “Collaborate with us or say good-bye to your family.”

Marvin did not want to lose an income considered not so bad for Honduran standards, much less did he want to get involved in any or-organized crime. But the trauma of seeing his family at gun point left him no other choice, but to hit the road. Though, he did not name the specific cartel, he told me, “nowhere is safe for me anymore, their members are everywhere...!”

In many Central American countries, government and security forces are tainted with widespread corruption allegations. It's often con-sidered absurd for anyone who gets into trouble with gangs to go and seek help from the police.

Confidence in the security forces is minimal. People assume that they just seek to collect bribes, and in some cases, collaborate with the gangs themselves. Many past incidents have proven to citizens that in certain neighborhoods, it's the armed cartels that run the show.

Amid growing unemployment rates and the scarcity of economic opportunities, it is easy for the underprivileged to fall into the trap of organized crime, where members of the cartel get to at least feed their families, who would otherwise starve.

But trading drugs, arms, and favors is not always easy money. Gangs from different cartels constantly clash with each other or the police, in order to keep their territory. More than often, they claim other lives or lose their own.

Fernando is one of many youngsters who does not want that future. But the reality on the ground did not offer him any alternatives. He said he was trapped between two options leading to the same end: getting killed working for a cartel or escaping from it.

As I was speaking to Fernando, the image of President Donald Trump conjured up in my head—a recent memory of him addressing one of the election rallies, where he accused migrants in the caravan of being MS-13 members, without any substantiation.

But the truth is, the infamous MS-13 not only emerged within the United States, but also constitutes less than 1% of total gang membership in the country. And the bigger irony to Trump's allegation is that many youth I've met in the caravan are actually there, exactly because they want a safe haven from the gangs in their countries.

Solomon also feared a similar fate looming for his own children. He wouldn't let them go out to play on the streets, fearful of potential shoot-outs that occasionally claim innocent lives. He did not want to raise them in an environment of constant insecurity, and a future full of uncertainty.

Solomon, himself, had been feeling the threats of cartels in his neighborhood, where he ran a small food store to make ends meet. Like most businesses in the area, he, too, was approached by gangs asking for protection money. Some even see it as "tax money" collected by cartels who control the area, given the power vacuum caused by the absence of effective policing, either out of weakness or corruption.

Solomon did NOT have any choice but to pay "his dues" to the gangs in charge. It was so that he "wouldn't get into any trouble" but the so-called taxing was arbitrary and increasingly expensive. Gangs showed up more frequently and asked for bigger sums, and each time, threatening him and his family.

Solomon watched his profit margin decline over several months, until it disappeared altogether. His business no longer offered an

income to feed his children. Instead, it turned into forced-labor that served the cartel alone. Many other examples in the area showed him that the lack of his allegiance could easily cost him his life—or worse, those of his family.

His only option was to flee, and do so without ever coming back. The network of the cartels extended into other regions, in many cases onto neighboring countries. That's why he couldn't take the risk of re-settling anywhere in the vicinity. The caravan was the perfect opportunity to make it all the way to the US—his safest bet.

Solomon was not a unique case at all. Many testimonies in the caravan resemble his desperation. And witnesses say that thousands of families in their communities suffer daily persecution and fear for their lives.

It's within this context that many human rights lawyers make the case for an asylum request. They claim that many of these people are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted, and that they should be protected as refugees under international law.

Though there is no guarantee that every person in the caravan would qualify as a refugee, and in fact, not everyone necessarily is there to seek asylum. Refugee status is of course granted on a case-by-case basis, as each particular individual could present a significantly different set of conditions.

We were surprised to hear reports that there were African migrants, who'd joined the caravan, too—an argument that was immediately turned into another anti-immigration propaganda to undermine the legitimacy of a cause shared by most in the caravan.

Over the course of several weeks I've spent following the caravan, I never encountered a non-central American migrant. The group was dominated mostly by Hondurans, followed by Guatemalans and Salvadorians. A minority of Nicaraguans, and towards the end, even some Mexicans had also joined the journey.

Based on dozens of interviews I've conducted, I could easily vouch for the fact that the majority of these migrants could at least make the case for asylum. However, a minority of cases could be said to be stretching the definition of refugee.

Dina is a single mother of two. I met her in one of the busiest tents hosting migrants in Mexico City. Families were sitting on mattresses scattered around, leaving just enough space to walk through the tent. Dina was sitting with two other women, also single mothers, who've met each other on the way and decided to stick to each other in solidarity.

The women all looked exhausted and confused. All of their children had gotten sick on the way multiple times. Even when pushed to their limits, they did not refuse to answer a few questions. Shy to the camera at first, Dina eventually had the courage to open up.

Dina had been totally isolated by her entire family, especially after separating from her husband. She cooked pastry on the streets, but barely had enough to feed her two children. She could not afford to pay rent and was forced to spend her nights sleeping under a bridge. She burst into tears, as she said she had nowhere to go.

Once we turned off our camera, she revealed a few more details, about the threats and abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband and his family. So it appeared, it might not have been just the

destitution she fled, but rather the domestic violence she said she'd been facing.

This interview had once again demonstrated to me that migrants may have much more deeply-rooted reasons to leave everything behind and undertake a journey to the unknown. Some of those reasons are so sensitive and personal that they may not easily surface at an en-counter with a journalist.

Many people were a lot more afraid of even showing their faces to the cameras —fearful of the slightest possibility that those who persecute or threaten them might see their location and decide to harm them or the loved ones they've left behind.

The stories of Solomon, Fernando, Marvin, and Dina are all quite different from each other, but they all have something in common: A constant sense of insecurity and fear for their safety. The driving force that pushed them forward appears to be the conviction that no matter how arduous, their distinct reasons make it a journey worth taking.

3- Mexico as the mediator

The caravan's slow but steady advance towards the US border was framed by the White House as an imminent national security threat. After having insulted Mexican immigrants during his presidential campaign, Donald Trump chose to stigmatize Central American migrants on the eve of the US mid-term elections.

In fact, US President Donald Trump had telephoned his Mexican counterpart Enrique Peña Nieto to put pressure on him to stop the

cara-van. On the ground, this request immediately translated into Mexican government efforts to try and make migrants stay.

Peña Nieto had one of Mexico's lowest approval rates for a President as he neared his last month in office. He announced that "migrants in the caravan would get a temporary official ID in Mexico, and be able to access the temporary work program." He also assured that they "will be able to get medical attention and even send [their] kids to school."

Knowing that Mexico could be an option to settle and start a new life came as a relief to most in the caravan, who'd been overwhelmed with so many unknowns regarding rest of their journey. To the extent that even psychological help was among the services offered to them while in Mexico City.

A local psychiatric NGO set up a tent, where migrants could make appointments and consult experts about their psychological issues. Marlen was one of those Mexican volunteers. She told me that scores of migrants she'd counseled were in so much distress and anxiety that they struggled in making the decision on whether to stay or continue.

It was symbolic and ironic in so many ways that right next to the tent offering psychological help, were other tents set up by the International Organization for Migrations (ION), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Mexico's own Immigration Agency, and other NGOs offering free legal counseling.

One could see migrants getting out from one tent and lining up at another one. They were discussing with each other about the best way forward. The only thing they all agreed on is that three-to-four

weeks on the road had already pushed them to the edge. And realizing that it was less than half way into their journey, those who could actually go back started considering that option.

I saw Christian and his friends signing papers inside the tent of IOM, which was offering migrants assisted return to their countries, if they voluntarily choose to do so. A group of friends, some of them as young as teenagers, had heard about the caravan passing through their town and decided to jump on board for the “heck of it.” As he casually joked and laughed with his friends, Cristian told me they “never thought it was going to take so long,” and that they ran out of money and got sick so many times, while spending hungry days on the road. And so now given the opportunity, they decided to head back, and maybe he said, next time they could plan it properly.

Later I met Cristopher Gascon, the representative of IOM on the ground, who told me that at the time, they’d registered about a hundred people willing to go back to their countries. Obviously, a small minority in a caravan of more than 5 thousand migrants.

Around the same time, the Honduran government announced a program with 27 million dollars of funding to provide support in housing, education, or investment for small enterprises. Supposedly, an incentive for emigrants to go back. But very few had actually heard about it, and far less had any trust in their government. And anyhow, financial incentives did not help those who’ve fled because of security reasons.

Another small group did not take issue with settling in Mexico when given the option. Especially those who felt a better sense of security there, or those who already have relatives in the country.

Some were also swayed by the level of attention they received during their long break in the Mexican capital, where relief came in the form of food, medicine, and accommodation, among others.

However, many migrants did understand that the make-shift refugee camp and its resources were not there to stay. Soon after the caravan's moved on and the media's dropped them from the headlines, they would simply become part of the Central American migrant community in Mexico —hundreds of thousands that struggle every day to make ends meet.

To most people in the caravan though, Mexico's offer came as good news, but more of a plan-B to fall back on, only if their goal to reach the US fails. Mexico's incentives and its attempts to convince them to stay clearly hadn't worked. "Thanks, but no, thanks" was the average response.

Migrants wondered if the Mexican government could instead help them get to the US border. Repeated requests from "Pueblo sin Fronteras" did not yield any response from the government. Instead, there was a feeling of reluctance on the government's part towards helping them reach their primary goal. It was ultimately a private firm that decided to sponsor buses that would take some of the migrants on their journey north. Many Mexicans also helped them out on the way, as several trucks and vehicles offered a ride to their next destination.

4- US Border — End or just The Beginning of a Nightmare!

The ultimate goal for the caravan was to make it into the United States, so many migrants inevitably assumed that reaching the border was as close as it gets to victory. In reality, most cases demonstrated that it may be only the beginning of yet another nightmare—in some cases, even more difficult than the journey thus far.

A couple of weeks before the caravan reached the border, President Donald Trump explicitly said in a rally, that he would not allow the migrant caravan to enter the United States. He deployed nearly 6 thousand troops to the southern border and in an unprecedented move, his administration changed the asylum regulations, establishing that only those who cross through the official ports of entry would be considered for asylum.

The UNHCR responded saying that, “National security and dignified reception of refugees and asylum-seekers are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing.” The international body claimed that the “long-standing insufficient reception capacity at official U.S. southern border ports of entry is resulting in significant delays in northern Mexico and is forcing many vulnerable asylum-seekers to turn in desperation to smugglers and cross the border irregularly.”

Trump’s new regulation contradicts the “Immigration and Nationality Act”, which clearly states that a claim for asylum could be filed, regardless of how or where the individual has entered the country. Many considered the move a misuse of his executive powers.

Trump’s decision took me back to a previous incident from when I was covering a previous caravan earlier in 2018. Hundreds of mi-

grants had gathered at the Tijuana border crossing. Many were sleeping on the streets without knowing when they'd be allowed to cross.

One of the organizers from “Pueblo sin Fronteras” was escorting a dozen people across the border and, when coming back out realizing that no more would be admitted for the day, he protested in outrage, saying that “the US border control is one of the largest US law enforcement agencies, with the capacity to deport over a thousand people a day, but when it comes to asylum seekers, they say they're at full capacity.”

Back then, it made more sense for many people to cross the border any way they could, often by sneaking through any opening they could find, and later file for asylum. But Trump's new regulation would allow the US government to deport them for “entering illegally”, even if they have a valid case for asylum —a move, experts say, that's at odds with international law.

Yet, former US Attorney General Jeff Sessions's policy, enacted in April of 2018, had caused widespread outrage in the US, and abroad. Sessions introduced a “zero-tolerance policy” that saw adult migrants who cross the border illegally face criminal prosecution —over the course of which adults in custody, facing criminal charges, would have to be separated from their children, who would then be kept at detention centers.

I met the Guinac family during its last moments of unity, as they arrived at the Tijuana Border Crossing in northern Mexico, all the way from Guatemala. We filmed Maria and her husband, on a chilly morning, getting ready with their three children to walk over the bridge into the US to request asylum.

The father was separated immediately from the rest of the family and deported back to Mexico within days. It took months for us to con-tact the rest of the family. Throughout that period the mother and her three children were kept in different detention centers in different states.

After the Supreme Court's decision to end the controversial "ze-ro-tolerance policy" and set a deadline for family reunification, Maria met her children in New York. We interviewed her in a relative's home in Los Angeles —where she waited for a court appointment.

She looked exhausted and embarrassed to have a large monitoring device shackled on her ankle. She said she didn't even feel like going outside the house. And the moment she started recounting those months separated from her children, she burst into tears: "It was the worst moment of my life," she said, "my children started crying, asking me not to leave them. I said it wasn't me, that I was being or-dered to leave them because the laws here are so strict. And I couldn't stay strong in front of them, it was so painful," she said, shedding more tears.

All her children remained very quiet, and seemed almost broken compared to the last time I had seen them before crossing the border. Her 5-year-old, the youngest one, still wakes up to nightmares, crying in the middle of the night —a sign of trauma, Maria says.

We showed them our interview with Maria's husband, who is still in Mexico following his deportation. "Baba" yelled the youngest one, as it was the first time he saw his father since Tijuana. Their lives are still far from certain. Maria wants to wait for the court date —to see if she still has a chance to obtain refugee status in the US.

I asked her whether she'd still go ahead with this journey, if she'd known these things could happen. She looked down and kept quiet —too fatigued to decide right away whether the gang violence in their hometown was worse after all than having a fractured and trauma-tized family.

The majority of migrants who crossed the border one way or another, have been deported. Some like Fernando noticed that trend, and decided to wait for the right time and place to cross the border illegally and remain undocumented within the US. Even though they believe they have a strong case for asylum, they couldn't risk being deported back to a country where they no longer feel safe.

BROKEN MESSENGERS

ALI MUSTAFA



Ali Mustafa reporting on violent protests from Ramallah in occupied West Bank

Covering Terror Attacks in Turkey

On a balmy October afternoon in 2015, two suicide bombers detonated explosives outside of the Turkish capital's main railway terminal, the Ankara Gari. Over one hundred people were killed. The now dead citizens had been calling for an end to a wave of terrorist attacks in Turkey.

The attack in Ankara was blamed on the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIS or Daesh. Thousands of people have been killed in hundreds of attacks carried out by ISIS across the Middle East, and Turkey is no different when it comes to the carnage. But ISIS isn't the only group using terrorism to achieve its regional and global goals. Groups like the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), considered a terrorist organisation by the US, have also targeted civilians in Turkey and Syria.

A few hours after the attack on peaceful demonstrators in Ankara, I found myself at a hospital where some of the injured and the dead had been taken. There I met a woman grieving the death of her twenty-four-year-old daughter. "She was very headstrong and wouldn't listen to my advice," said the grieving mother, Mariam. With tears in her eyes she recalled how she had begged her daughter, Fatima, not to take part in the demonstrations that day. "I had told her not to go to the rally, but she wouldn't listen."

That afternoon I recalled words of a dear friend and mentor, "Ali" David Klatell. Years earlier, as we worked together to finish my thesis at Columbia Journalism School, he said, "try to tell stories of the oppressed and marginalised. Focus on people who are suffering. The threat of violence, and injustice as a result of it, is often worse than violence itself."

My journey in journalism began in Afghanistan in 2004. I was on a four-month fellowship working on a thesis at Saint Louis University, when I assisted journalists for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch to cover the Taliban attacks in Afghanistan that year. Eleven years later, I was reporting on a more pertinent threat at the crossroads of East and West.

Emotions ran high at the hospital that October afternoon in Ankara. Making the situation more difficult was the fact that I was reporting for TRT World, the Turkish public broadcaster's English news network. A few of the relatives of those killed held the government responsible for not doing enough to protect the demonstrators. The mourners thought the government was focusing too much on the PKK's terrorism and not enough on Daesh, which they viewed as the bigger threat.

The fight against groups such as Daesh and the PKK is a complicated one for many actors in the Middle East. Take the PKK as an example. While the US considers this group to be a terrorist organisation, the US military funds and backs the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the YPG, against Daesh in Syria. Similarly, Turkey is accused of supporting anti-Syrian regime forces considered by the West to be terrorist groups.

My understanding of the Middle East has been informed while reporting on this chaos since I moved to the region five years ago. Prior to relocating to Turkey, I had been in Qatar working for Al Jazeera English and reporting on Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It was a valuable position from which to monitor critical events happening at a global flashpoint; events that were determining the nature and changing role of strategic actors, state and non-state alike.

Daesh and the PKK were changing the shape of a key region, with wide ranging implications for not only Europe and the Middle East, but also Russia and the US. One critical clue that the world was changing fast came with the arrival of millions of refugees, first to Turkey and then to Europe. In May 2016, I found myself at the Idomeni refugee camp as it was being "cleared" of thousands of refugees.

Closed borders in Europe

After Macedonia shut its borders with Greece at the Idomeni railway crossing, Greek authorities had little time to meet the needs of the growing swell of refugees who were arriving in large numbers. Twelve thousand refugees had settled at the northern Greek

railway crossing of Idomeni, and had started occupying the railway tracks because space was running out in the adjacent fields. Tents on the tracks became a symbol of protest against Skopje's decision to close the border, through which thousands had earlier passed on to destinations in Europe such as Austria and Germany. Athens decided to "forcibly remove" the refugees, citing security concerns after fights broke out among a diversity of refugees with different lingual and ethnic backgrounds.

"Only God can help us here," said Khalil Najjar, a twenty-two-year-old refugee from the Syrian city of Aleppo, who had briefly stayed at the Idomeni camp and had been moved to a refugee-processing center at Cherso by the Greek authorities. Najjar was a Kurd who had escaped the Syrian regime's barrel bomb attacks in Aleppo. He had briefly worked in the Turkish city of Mardin before making a journey to Europe. The fair-skinned Syrian boarded a raft in Izmir in January 2016 and arrived on the Greek island of Kos. Within a few weeks, he'd reached northern Greece, where his journey came to an abrupt end. "I was about to leave for Germany when Macedonia shut its borders," he said.

"In Syria, I had walls and a roof; here I live under a piece of cloth, next to snakes and rats," Najjar said. He added, "There is nothing for us here, we want to move on." But Najjar and thousands of others remain stranded inside of Greece because of divisions with Europe over refugee policies and the European Union's humanitarian ideals. These ideals are under threat in those towns most impacted by the arrival of outsiders. In Germany for instance, the influx has led to the rise of far-right groups exploiting anti-immigrant xenophobia.

Bigotry and xenophobia on the rise

Far-right groups in Germany, such as those considered pro-Nazi, have demonstrated in recent years calling for a change in the political direction, and a more comprehensive approach to deal with the refugee crisis. One such demonstration took place in the town of Bautzen in October 2015, and around two thousand demonstrators showed up. I was covering this and other events in the town that month. Some at the rally spoke to me—a brown man, reporting on the far-right—and they were even okay when I told them my name. But when they spoke of a perceived invasion of “outsiders,” the veil was lifted, revealing their hatred and plans to “get rid of the vermin,” as they called the refugees.

But hatred of outsiders isn't just confined to Europe; it is also spreading in North America. The election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States unleashed a wave of threats and attacks on those considered outsiders. From attacks on Jewish cemeteries and Muslim places of worship to threats against foreigners, political rhetoric is normalising discrimination and is making it okay to criticize others and label them a threat. It is important to put these experiences into a broader context. The focus then needs to be on individuals and communities that have stood up against xenophobia across communities and ethnicities

Muslim activists in North America raising funds to repair a vandalised Jewish cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri, is one example of responding to discrimination and resisting the normalization of hate through political rhetoric. Students aspiring to be journalists also need to move beyond simplistic anecdotes for why individuals and communities discriminate. Economic reasons tell part of the story, but we must delve deeper and tell stories of communal conditioning of racism, for example.

In 2017, I taught a junior-level journalism and communications seminar to students at Northwestern University in Qatar. It was interesting to hear their perspectives on discrimination and rising xenophobia in Western societies. Some students were from the Middle East, others from South Asia, and a few from the US and Canada. All were poised to leave for journalism residencies in London and the United States. The stories they had reported on and the ideas these young reporters had come up with to execute during their residencies made one thing clear; discrimination and bigotry is not only a Western construct, and in the current environment it is not just limited to countries in the West.

Blasphemy Law in Pakistan

November 2018 saw parts of Pakistan erupt in protests over the Supreme Court acquittal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who was convicted of blasphemy by a lower court in 2010 and put on death row. She had been convicted on what were later dismissed as false charges of denigrating the religion of Islam and its prophet; a charge that carried the death penalty in Pakistan. The Blasphemy law in Pakistan is a relic of the British era, when colonial rulers had used such instruments to control inter-communal violence, most notably in United Bengal at the turn of the nineteenth century. Later, in the 1980s, Pakistan's then military ruler, General Zia-ul-Haq, added to these draconian measures through the Hudood ordinance, which expanded the gambit of offences related to what constituted as blasphemy. Decades after Haq's death in a mysterious plane crash, his measures had found widespread support across religious lines.



Ali Mustafa with orphans in Syria



Regarding the Asia Bibi acquittal, I was told, "If the court doesn't take back its decision, Pakistan will be stopped. I promise you." This from an excited protester on D-Chowk, a large town square that connects the main Constitution Avenue in Pakistan's capital to the rest of Islamabad. The capital territory had been blocked at major intersections by supporters of Pakistan's Sunni Barelvi sect—one of two major sects within Sunni Islam in Pakistan. While the Barelvi's were often accused of blasphemy themselves by their Deobandi counterparts—mainly for rituals involving shrine worshipping, the two sects, and others including adherents to Shia Islam, had found common ground in the case of Asia Bibi.

Soon after Bibi was charged in 2010, one of Pakistan's most prominent politicians, Salman Taseer—then the governor of Pakistan's largest province, came to her defence. His vocal support of Bibi made him a target, and he was gunned down in broad daylight in Islamabad by his own bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, who said he did it to protect the sanctity of Islam's prophet Muhammad. Qadri was executed in 2016 after the court found him guilty of murder.

In Islamabad in late 2018, protesters held banners of Qadri with the word "Ghazi" (victor in Urdu), emblazoned below it. "He was a saint and a protector of Islam and we will continue fighting in his memory, said Farooq Ahmed, aged twenty-six. He had traveled from Bahawalpur, a bustling town nine hours south of the capital, to be part of the protests against Bibi's acquittal. "Qadri gave a reason not to give up in the fight against anti-Islamic forces in the country," he said.

In many ways the anti-blasphemy debate in Pakistan has pitted the country's marginalised against the marginalised. Those who support anti-blasphemy measures, like Ahmed, come from some of the most disenfranchised communities in the country. It is where

the religious pulpit reigns supreme, and clerics are often used by land-owning elites to get the underprivileged in line.

Feudalism in Pakistan

“Landlords are beneficiaries of a broken system that exploits the poor and empowers the rich,” says Shaukat Qadir a former brigadier with the Pakistan armed forces and a frequent commentator on social issues in Pakistan. “Consequently, their desire to do away with this [system] is very limited, and their primitive beliefs of dominance, such as suppression of women, continue to exist.” The Pakistani army is also deeply entrenched in the feudal system, ensuring its longevity.

Currently, sixty-five percent of Pakistan's 200 million people are below age thirty. Nearly fifty percent of the country's population lives in towns with at least 5,000 people; an increase from thirty percent a decade ago. A young, urbanising population is starting to challenge the status quo by demanding more rights. “Political office is inherited in Pakistan,” political economist and author Manzur Ejaz explained. “The provincial and national assemblies are dominated by feudal landowners.” At least seventy-five percent of the Pakistani government's legislative branch is composed of landowners.

The feudal system is not confined to the political arena. Land ownership links feudal lords to Pakistan's various other patronage networks. Landlords, such as Pakistan's current foreign minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, act as religious patron saints to thousands of peasant followers, who loyally vote for their feudal lord at election

time. "Local religious figures and feudal landlords compliment each other's authority and enable the further spread of feudalism," said Ejaz.

The landowner uses this local influence to further his political ambitions by fostering a system dominated by feudal power. In this sense, rural police officials, local bureaucrats, and religious leaders all represent the feudal lord's interests. "The army also contributes to and benefits from feudalism, unconsciously. One of the benefits army officers get for their service is agricultural land, which they then rent out to larger landowners," Qadir told me in a report that appeared on Al Jazeera English. The army taps into the feudal system to get the resources it needs, and so "the feudal system is indirectly fostered."

Yellow Vests Movement

Pakistan's fight against feudalism is a case study of rapidly shifting demographics from rural to urban areas, the world over. The imbalance this shift represents was felt in France in November 2018, when tens of thousands of people, mostly from disenfranchised areas, took to the streets wearing neon-yellow vests, to protest against government-imposed fuel surcharges and the rising cost of living.

The "gilet jaunes" represent the most marginalised of French society, and they directed their anger against what they said was an unequal system rigged in favor of the rich, and protected by politicians such as French President Emmanuel Macron. "Emmanuel Macron is sellout, who has sold the poor for the interests of the rich," said

Marlene, a woman in her thirties, wearing a yellow vest in front of Paris' Arc de Triomphe. The arch, considered a symbol of the republic, had been vandalised the night before; rioters spray-painted profanities against "usurpers and termites."

Much of the fury was directed at Macron—the "chef"—who protesters say is disconnected from the reality of millions of French citizens who are falling through the cracks of an economically unsustainable system. "Housing in Paris is really, really expensive," said Sidney Ere, a video technician from the French city of Lyon, now living in Paris. "Even food is. I had to find a solution, because my salary wasn't rising." With options running out fast, Ere started squatting in an abandoned warehouse. "I live in this squat with fifteen other people," Ere gave me tour of the warehouse, in a suburb of Paris, where he and his fifteen fellow squatters are living.

Under pressure, Macron announced a series of concessions, including an extra 100 euros (\$112) for those earning the 1,499 euro (\$1,690) minimum wage—at no extra cost to employers. The proposed fuel taxes were scrapped, and extra charges on pensions below 2,000 euros (\$2,255) were eliminated. "The grievances of the yellow vest movement are deep and mostly legitimate," said the French president. "But talks, not violence is the way forward."

While the government hoped the concessions would ease the tensions on the street; in Paris, the people remained divided as to what these might actually achieve. "The concessions were a big joke," said Ere. "This is a smoke screen. You won't fool us with this."

In the absence of a core-leadership, divergent groups have frequently tried to take over the yellow vest movement. Radical leftists, such as Alexis Cobierre and Thierry Paul Vallete, themselves

followers of veteran leader Jean-Luc Antoine Pierre Mélenchon, have tried to champion the cause of the yellow vests at the top. But it is at the bottom of the yellow vest pyramid where groups such as the far-right National Front led by Marine Le Pen, are threatening a takeover of the movement.

“Eighty percent of the French people support the yellow vests,” said Jean Messiha, the senior political advisor to Le Pen. Messiha said, given the large number of French who had supported the movement for more economic rights, it was expected that members of the National Front would support the movement; but that it didn’t matter if the far right was infiltrating the protests. “The question is, what is the government going to do about it,” he said.

Syrians in Germany

The inability of European governments to tackle economic hardship faced by millions has been exacerbated in recent years with the arrival of almost a million refugees fleeing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. One of the areas most affected by the refugee influx has been Eastern Germany, where tens of thousands of Syrians have been settled by the German government.

In 2016, a mob of suspected neo-Nazis attacked teenage refugees from Syria in the German town of Bautzen. Twenty refugees between the ages of 14 and 18 were injured. Some were left traumatised and had to be relocated out of Bautzen. “Some locals don’t want us here. And when the Nazis started to beat us, the police stood by silently and did nothing,” said a Syrian refugee named Ahmed. He had witnessed the beatings firsthand and was afraid to reveal his full identity. Some locals said they don’t want the refugees in their

town and they support the far right in its anti-refugee stance.

That same year, Ernest Bauer, a leader of the National Democratic Party (NDP), led an anti-immigration rally in Bautzen. The NDP is an ultra-nationalist political group, which some say is sympathetic to Germany's Nazi past. It is against refugee resettlement and has demonstrated across Germany over the government's open-door policy. Five hundred people took part in the protest; some chanted, "the refugees are terrorists." "We want them out," said Bauer. "There are criminals amongst them who want to carry out terror attacks in Germany, much like the attacks in Paris and Belgium, which killed many people."

The large influx of refugees was putting pressure on local communities at a time of economic downturn in most European economies. In response, far-right groups held demonstrations throughout the east, and even in some towns in the west of Germany. Bautzen had been at the center of rising tensions between locals and the two thousand refugees who were settled there in the previous two years. Bautzen's then mayor, Alexander Ahrens, who helped resettle many of the refugees, has supported Angela Merkel's open-door policy. But Ahrens has found himself in the minority in defending the refugee resettlement initiative. He said some of the younger refugees have made it difficult to sell the idea to locals in Bautzen.

"The refugees had been disturbing locals, harassing them near the town centre," said Ahrens. "This gave an opportunity for the far right to move in." Sitting in the mayor's sunny office in October 2016, in a heritage building in the Bautzen town center, he told me, "In East Germany, you quite often find what I call a sort of 'naive racism'—the right-wing feels they are doing what the majority wants."

My visit to Bautzen that year had coincided with the twenty-six-year anniversary of the reunification of East and West Germany. The backlash against refugees was fiercest in towns such as Bautzen and Dresden, which were previously part of Soviet-backed German Democratic Republic. “East Germans feel that they’ve been left behind, socially and economically,” said Aherns. He said the refugee crisis coincided with a deep sense of resentment against the reunification project. “Some East Germans question the government’s approach to allowing hundreds of thousands of refugees to settle in the country, when they themselves haven’t fully been integrated.”

“Angela Merkel has betrayed us,” Bauer said, and accused the chancellor of peddling lies and selling a fantasy to the people. “If resettlement and integration of refugees is done properly and under established laws, we may have been open to it, but this is not what was happening. Refugees were being imposed on Germans, and this was unacceptable,” he said.

Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

As Syrian refugees struggled to gain acceptance in Germany, Palestinians were fighting a different battle—to gain rights living under what former US President Jimmy Carter called “Israeli apartheid.” Israel has been occupying Jordanian lands, which Palestinians claim as their own, since 1967. An estimated three million Palestinians live in this territory under Israeli occupation. While many say they have been fighting for an independent Palestine, there are others who say they want equal rights as Israeli citizens—a demand Jewish-Israeli hardliners, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, says is unrealistic.

“Those Israelis that are holding on to leftist ideologies, two-state solutionism. Surrender, a kind of weakness, they will be pushed out,” said Yishai Fleisher, the spokesman for the Jewish settlers of Hebron, a contested town in Israeli-occupied West Bank. Fleisher who is against the inclusion of Palestinians in the social and political fabric of Israel, is one of 15,000 people who live in the Efrat settlement. Many, like Yishai’s family, came from the former Soviet Union. “We are building, having children. We have a lot of hope. In our minds this is the greatest time in Jewish history,” Fleisher said in late 2018.

US President Donald Trump had moved the embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem a couple months earlier, in a move that to Trump’s supporters in Israel, including Fleisher, meant that the US had effectively recognised the contested city of Jerusalem as Israel’s “eternal capital.” But the US move to relocate its embassy drew international criticism, especially from UN member states, which described it as affront to US-led peace talks.

“It lays bare the hypocrisy of the American position on the peace process,” Saeb Erekat told me in Ramallah. “The US claims to be a neutral arbiter to the conflict, but the embassy move proves it is squarely behind the Israeli occupation,” said Erekat, who had served as the chief Palestinian negotiator in peace talks with Israel. “The Palestinian authority has lost all moral ground when it comes to representing the Palestinian cause,” said Diana Buttu, a Canadian-Palestinian human rights activist who negotiated alongside Erekat with the Israelis following the 1993 Oslo peace accords.

“[Palestinian President] Mahmoud Abbas has lost touch the reality on the ground,” Buttu said, blaming the octogenarian leader for acting as Israel’s enforcer vis-a-vis the occupied territories. “It’s time

for new leaders, a new beginning to reset and restart the Palestinian struggle built on grounded realities for millions of Palestinians living under occupation—a vast majority of whom were born after the Oslo peace accords were signed.” said Buttu.

Fifty-five percent of the Palestinian population living in the occupied territories and the Gaza strip—which Israel left in 2005, but still continues to siege from land and sea, along with Egypt—is below the age of twenty-four. “The Palestinian people want a future that is their own, free of the Israeli occupation and relics of the past such as Mahmoud Abbas,” said Buttu.

The relationship between the marginalised and those in power might seem clearly defined—as in those without rights, such as the Palestinians standing up to elites from within and outside, to move their demands from the peripheries to the center of contention. But often these lines are blurred, especially when it comes to the means by which these demands are made. Journalists are of one many vehicles through which the marginalised can make claims on the powerful, however, in performing this role, the messengers often become targets of suppression themselves.

Journalists Targeted in Pakistan

In Pakistan, more than forty journalists have been killed on the job since 2011. Most of these storytellers were killed during or after reporting on stories critical of the establishment or the elite, such as the terror attack on a military facility in Pakistan's largest city in May 2011. Covering that story had grave consequences for one of Pakistan's best security reporters, Syed Saleem Shahzad.

Shahzad was a pioneer of sorts when it came to covering security in the so-called “Af-Pak” region, and he specialised in covering Al Qaeda in South Asia. He had come across details incriminating insiders within the Pakistan military while covering the PNS Mehran attack in 2011, and revealed how the attack had been planned by Pakistan navy personnel allegedly affiliated with Al Qaeda. Two days after the story was published, Shahzad went missing outside of his home in Islamabad; his body was discovered in a waterway hundreds of miles to the south.

The day he was abducted, Shahzad was to appear on a local television network to talk about his findings alleging links between military insiders and Al Qaeda in planning and supporting the attack in Karachi. Days before he went missing, Shahzad had walked into the Islamabad offices of Human Rights Watch and told the chief that Pakistan's intelligence services were after him. He said contacts with the intelligence agencies had been relentlessly calling him since his report had come out.

Shahzad's death followed the killing of dozens of Pakistani reporters who had been covering the so-called US “war on terror.” The trauma associated with journalism in places like Pakistan, is then felt by journalists well after the story fades. These are the unfortunate facts of life in journalism, where post-traumatic stress can affect the personal lives of the storytellers themselves.

Emotional Toll on the Messengers

I speak through my own personal experience of having “lost control” over the most mundane, everyday things following events mentioned in this chapter, such as the yellow vest protests. Tear

gas shells were flying as fast as rubber bullets, and rocks thrown by protesters missed my head a few times. I persevered in the heat of the moment, but with time and distance, the suppressed emotions associated with those events, sometimes perk up without notice. Coming to terms with these emotions can be a rude awakening for journalists who often have to suppress emotions in trying to convey the stories they cover.

The balance here can be an illusion when it comes to the journalist's own emotional state, for how does one reconcile the story of seven-year-old Majda—who lost both legs in a Syrian regime bombing—with the geopolitics of Syria; with Iran and Russia supporting the forces that were responsible for the girl's terrible loss in the name of fighting a war on terror.

How does a reporter come to terms with being a witness and messenger to events of great suffering and tragedy and loss; with the reality of being a human being with emotions as a father, mother, wife or husband, without becoming disconnected to the emotions associated with both personal and professional roles. This is the very human cost of telling stories of the marginalised, with the heavy responsibility of not marginalising oneself in the process. The struggle is real.

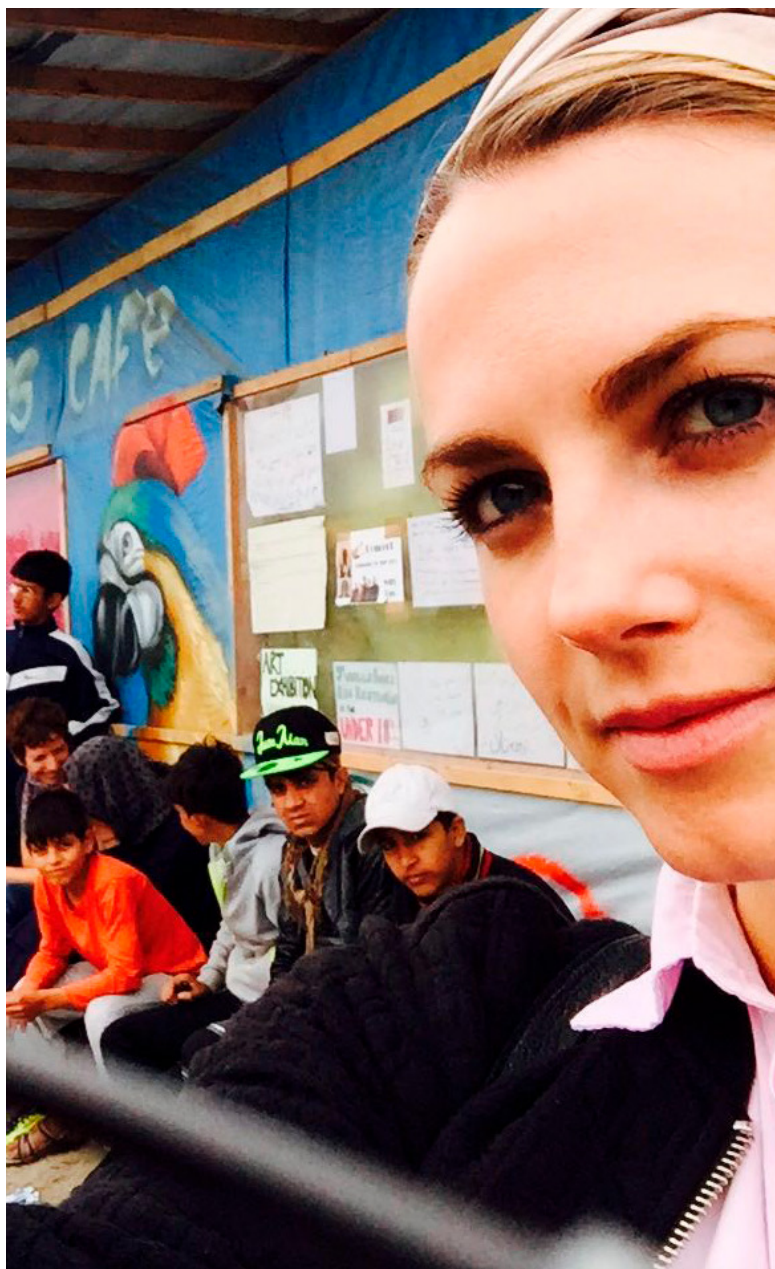
After four decades of teaching journalism and mentoring journalists, David Klatell passed away in 2016 at the age of sixty-six. If he were alive today, he would be vigorously pushing his students to tell stories of the oppressed and the marginalised, to focus on the personal accounts of resistance against discrimination.

Klatell would ask his students to highlight the sense of a shared humanity that makes American Jews stand alongside American

Muslims for common causes. That makes Pakistanis like Salman Taseer—from the enfranchised majority, stand for the most marginalised, like Asia Bibi, despite threats to their lives. He would argue that if these stories were told, they would transcend any medium to become a sort of collective catharsis; an experience that could lead to a collective response against hate and discrimination.

REFUGEE AND MIGRANT REPORTING:
A VIEW FROM THE FRONTLINE

MYRIAM FRANCOIS



Myriam with some of the child refugees in the Calais "jungle" (pre-demolition).

For years, as the Europe correspondent for TRT World, I had the immense privilege of reporting on what is typically described as Europe's "migrant crisis." I reported mainly from France and the United Kingdom, with several trips to a camp in Calais, France—the so-called "Calais Jungle"—where many who hoped to make it to the UK had settled. Public opinion naturally shapes the environment in which a story is received; and the broader climate of fear, anxiety, and hostility towards migrants and refugees impacted the type and tone of stories that got airtime in Europe. For many of us reporting on the crisis, the challenge was to resist the pull of the polarised sides and attempt to present the reality of what we were witnessing.

The two versions of the Calais Jungle are symptomatic of the real divide within Europe on how to approach those who were smuggled onto European shores. Calais was seen by some as a magnet for eco-

conomic migrants seeking to bypass European immigration systems and exploit their human rights frameworks in order to enter particular countries. This perspective often came with a presumption that migrants were seeking to exploit Europe's "generous" welfare system. In this narrative, they are often seen as an undifferentiated "swarm"—a term that then UK Prime Minister David Cameron had himself used in a speech in 2015.

The dehumanising language of pest control and vermin was echoed in some quarters of the mainstream press, as columnists nurtured fears of a tidal wave of foreigners hell-bent on overtaking European culture, and of terrorists in their midst. Such fears were exacerbated by incidents appearing to show that terrorists were exploiting the confusion over migrant arrivals in Europe; and reports of sexual assaults and acts of violence by refugees were upheld as indicative of the implied threat "refugees" as a whole posed.

On the other side of the spectrum were those who could only see migrants through the lens of refugees. The difference in terminology is important, not least because of the implications of a person's status. While refugees have been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster, migrants are defined as those seeking to find work or better living conditions. This differentiation is in no way a value judgment on the worthiness of the latter, nor on the understandable reasons many seek better lives for themselves and their families. However, the difference does have legal implications and, therefore, implications on how reporters contextualise those stories.

The nuance of constraint is vitally important in the context of reporting, since in full respect of existing laws (whether we, as reporters, agree with them or not!), refugees simply do not have the same

legal status as migrants. As such, in our reporting we had to balance each country's immigration laws, the European Union's stance on immigration as it evolved, and the often deeply moving stories of those who might be termed "economic migrants." At times, the line between who might be a "refugee" versus who might be dubbed a "migrant" felt arbitrary and unfair. In those cases, the question of "impartial" reporting really came to the fore. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that highlighting apparent inequities in how the law operates was often the best way around this issue.

What rendered the Calais stories ever more complex was the dimension of unaccompanied minors, a topic I reported on several times, highlighting the plight of those left to fend for themselves in insalubrious, unsafe conditions, and often at the mercy of predatory traffickers. We shone the light on the struggle many of the teenagers faced in proving their date of birth; many having arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs, and therefore unable to prove their age. We also had to account for the reality that many care providers would recommend that migrants and refugees of borderline age affirm that they were under age to have a better chance at remaining. Such sensitive issues were clearly potential fodder for sensationalist media outlets, so deciding how to include the full truth of what was happening came into sharp focus, with the knowledge that the information could be abused for populist gain.

Although national conversations were focused largely on Syrian refugees, many of those we interviewed in Paris and Calais were from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Eritrea, etc. Syrians were unexpectedly hard to come across for many of us first arriving at the Calais camp, and this certainly complexified the narrative that those arriving at the site were fleeing war-torn Syria. Much closer to the truth was that some people were indeed fleeing war, persecution, and famine,

while others were simply searching for a better life. Often we heard of lies that had been told about European largesse. Many of the unaccompanied minors who were interviewed when they arrived in the UK bemoaned the sharp contradiction with what they had expected to find. For many, the system seemed harsher, the people far less friendly, the wealth and opportunities still very much out of reach. One young man told us he actually wanted to go home to Afghanistan.

One case that we followed closely was that of a charity worker, Liz Clegg, who ran the women and children's centre in the Calais camp, and was known as "the Pied Piper of the Jungle." Having grown up with the UK traveller community, Liz was clearly more at ease than most with the site's rough conditions and makeshift facilities—the centre itself was housed in a converted bus. This was a place of solace and security for minors who had no place where they could just be children. It was in corners of this bus where you could catch a glimpse of them showing vulnerability, letting out a laugh or even a cry, or simply in need of a hug.

There were many challenges to telling the stories of unaccompanied minors, from legitimate concerns that young people were being exploited by the media or that their stories could be used against them, to the complexities of parental consent for on-screen presence in the absence of a guardian. There were, additionally, the very real obstacles of trauma, cultural barriers to communication, and linguistic challenges, even with a translator. Beyond the technical challenges was the question of what service these particular stories might serve in trying to explain what was happening in Calais itself, but also in terms of the wider picture of the so-called refugee crisis.

It seemed then, as it seems now, that additional stories of trauma and struggle, of war and loss, were inaudible to a public overwhelmingly concerned that immigration was changing their national identity. What is more, connecting those individual stories to the wider dynamics of EU quotas for individual countries, to the rise of the far right in Europe and wider populist undertones in the mainstream, posed questions over framing and how individual stories could be instrumentalised to further some of these agendas. It raised questions over our responsibility as journalists in reporting the stories of vulnerable people, especially those of unaccompanied minors, in ways that would not further foment hostility towards them. This, of course, was not entirely predictable.

Back in the UK, my colleagues and I worked on the stories of refugees who had made their way here, either through a government scheme, such as that pioneered by Lord Dubs, or through less “conventional” means. We followed the story of one young man who had been taken under the wing of Liz Clegg while in Calais, and who had somehow managed to find his way to her home in Birmingham after leaping off the back of a lorry once it had crossed over to the UK. The story was a complex one to report—for many who had finally managed to reach the UK after such a momentous journey, they did not want a spotlight shone on their new lives, their struggling friendships. Small details shared, such as a new pair of trainers they had bought, could be presented as them “exploiting” the system. Sensitivity was necessary in presenting personal challenges such as the difficulties in doing schoolwork in English, or conflict with carers who do not always share the same cultural codes with issues like bedtime curfews or gender roles.

We sought to consistently tell these stories to reflect the precariousness of their legal situation; unaccompanied minors can be and of-

ten are sent back once they reach adulthood if their asylum claims fail. The strains on these young adults are tremendous; already in the throes of teenage dilemmas and awkwardness, of being singled out as different, of being peered at and leered at for holding a status—that of “refugee,” which was and is widely derided. We attempted to convey, as much as possible, the human struggle that had led them to seek a new life thousands of miles from home, alone and without obvious or consistent communication with family. Witnessing big, burly teenagers, typically with a tough facade, close to tears as they told us they wished only to see their mums, was the sort of window into their stories that we sought to capture. But it was also what they often did not want shared on a public platform.

For many of us journalists, another challenge was escaping the war-story/tragedy angle that was often the obvious entry point into explaining the stories of refugees and migrants. This can cause “sympathy fatigue” in the audience several months, if not weeks, into reporting if it is perceived that similar stories were simply being retold in different ways; and to what end? How could we continue to share the tragic experiences of the people we were interviewing, but find new ways of engaging an audience that seemed to have become hardened to the steady stream of tragedy? One of the strategies I used was to tell stories of refugees outside of Europe, to try and re-center the scale of migration and highlight the ways in which often much poorer countries, in Africa and Asia, were coping with large influxes of people in dire need.

In late 2017, I travelled to Kenya to meet refugees who were part of a UNHCR programme designed to help artists who had been afflicted by displacement. At that time, Kenya was home to several refugee camps, including the second-largest refugee camp in the world. In order to shift the narrative around refugees, we decided



A sign by the entrance of the Calais Jungle “London calling”



to highlight a scheme devised by one of Kenya's most famous trap artists, known as Octopizzo. Born and raised in the slums of Kibera, Octopizzo knows first-hand that excellence is sometimes produced under pressure, and as a musician he wanted to shine a light on the talent languishing in refugee camps in Kenya. With the help of the UNHCR, he created Refugees Have Talent, a spin-off talent contest run within the camps that aimed to give refugee artists an opportunity to shine.

Through a series of auditions, Octopizzo and a panel of judges selected artists to collaborate on an album, "Refugeenius," which sought to flip the script on the stories we so often hear about refugees—of dependency, tragedy, powerlessness, and need. Instead of seeing refugees as a burden on society, Octopizzo's talent contest aimed to showcase them as a pool of untapped talent that could be channelled into a range of industries, including creative fields. In a very deliberate effort to highlight a different kind of refugee story, we followed the lives of three refugees at different stages of their journey. One was a young, aspiring rapper known as SKEGI, whom Octopizzo had taken as a protégé, and whose big dream of performing on illustrious stages contrasted so starkly with the curfew he had to meet whenever he left Kakuma refugee camp to perform. His story itself raised questions over whether the operation of refugee camps could in fact be stifling talent; in this case, simply seeking the opportunity to shine.

We also met with Eric, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who had also been selected by Octopizzo, and whose dream of setting up a music school had come true. Living as an urban refugee in Nairobi, we filmed Eric with his students at the school he established from the prize money he won in the talent contest. By interviewing these young people, who saw the school as training

ground for a professional career in music, we offered the viewer an opportunity to see what refugees can achieve with relatively small investments, and how, in Eric's case, his personal experience fleeing conflict inspired him to help others. Eric offered scholarships to other refugees to help them in achieving their dreams.

For our third story, we featured a young woman, Flora, who had fled forced conscription in Eritrea as a teen, and built a new life for herself as a visual artist. As we watched her sell her first paintings at a glamorous gallery in the center of Nairobi, we hoped, as filmmakers, to highlight the real potential of those fleeing conflict. Often reduced to the refugee label, they have not only reinvented themselves, but also have given back to their host country and, indeed, become a part of the tapestry that enriches it.

Telling the stories of refugees, whether as a news reporter or as a filmmaker, carried different challenges, but, ultimately, it seems the most critical objective in each case has always been to tell authentic stories, which at their heart, accurately and fairly reflect the subject's journey and reality. In that process, audience reception and broader political conversations influence how these issues must necessarily be framed by the media in order to protect those vulnerable to persecution and political exploitation.

The best stories for me have always been those that create understanding between radically different worlds and build empathy with others across cultural, religious, and linguistic lines. It has always been my hope that my reports have contributed and joined with others hoping to bring about change in how we report on, and perceive more broadly, the people we refer to as "refugees."

MY JOURNEY AS A JOURNALIST

AHMET ALIOĞLU

My wife was about to deliver our baby boy, but the rumble of shells and missiles—a strange throb heard through blackouts and prayers at the mosque—had spread a state of panic. It was January 2009 in the Gaza Strip. On those days, one can hardly watch the news due to the everlasting power cuts. As a journalist, I had to keep an eye on the developments in the news, and my only source of information was the car radio.

Once, while taking notes for stories I might be covering for the Los Angeles Times and the BBC, the breaking news caught my ear; three people were killed—a pregnant women and her husband and



A Palestinian protester picks up a tear gas canister launched by Israeli forces following their intervention in a "Great March of Return" demonstration near Israel-Gaza border, in Rafah, Gaza on April 05, 2019.



mother had been targeted by a helicopter missile while they were heading to Al-Aqsa Brigade Hospital, the place where my wife was soon to give birth. Death notices posted on alley walls flutter and blow away, and are quickly replaced by new ones. If one is lucky, on a good day, he can find an ambulance to take his sick, pregnant wife to the hospital. People were breathing in their scents like in the times before bomb craters and quickly dug graves.

Fortunately, the war ended a couple of days before the birth. Israeli forces banned international journalists from accessing the besieged enclave. Local journalists and freelancers had to take the lead and cover the stories. My interest has always been the stories of normal people living under the lunacy of Israel's excessive power and unprecedented use of air strikes. In those days, news reports of seventy civilians killed in one day would strike a chord; it might lead to an urgent meeting of the United Nations Security Council. Gazans were fortunate that the brutality of the Arab dictators, and the Syrian regime's chemical attacks, didn't precede Gaza's war in 2008-09. The Israelis were much emboldened in the next war, in 2014—the fiercest and most fatal war on Gaza.

Even during the sporadic ceasefires, the air over the seaside enclave was pierced by the explosive sounds of jets and rockets. The sky was its own eerie show; smoke blossoming like flowers the color of coal, and white, incandescent flares bursting and arcing, their plumes hanging over cities and towns. One day I went out to report on people's lives in my hometown. It is difficult for me to forget the story of one family I spent a day with.

Yousif Nagla, aged 42, lives in the nearby village of Az Zawaida in a house he shares with his two teenage sons, two of his younger brothers, and their families. The house is not plastered—the block-

ade around Gaza since 2007 has choked off supplies of mortar and cement—and rain often seeps through, but the yard is big, with a garden and a pen for the chickens. On his way to go out shopping, Nagla told me “This life is really odd, you see. Our brothers are being killed and we are going shopping.” Returning from the make-shift market, hushed voices around us turned a question into a chorus: “When will it end?”

There is a widespread belief among Palestinians that none of them is born apolitical. If you ask the average Gazan a political question, you will not just get an answer; you will have it explained in the context of a broad political assessment, with the ideological background of conflict, the paradigms of the warring parties, and the list never ends. At the Nagla family home, brothers gathered and ruminated, assessing, arguing, trying to find logic in battle plans and diplomacy; and recalling how years ago young Palestinian men fought the Israelis with rifles and rocks.

That political debate still echoes in my mind. “Despite the fact that we may not accept their strategies and tactics, Hamas fighters are brave, and lions in battle,” said one of the brothers. “Don’t believe the Israeli propaganda about destroying Hamas’ infrastructure—you’ll be naive if you buy into this,” he added. His younger brother interrupted, saying, “You’re right, but does this deserve the unbelievable losses our people are suffering?” He was angry with Khaled Meshaal, the Hamas leader who was in exile in Syria at that time. The young brother said, “Meshaal keeps saying, ‘My Palestinian nation, you have to be patient and endure the suffering to reach liberty, this is the path of freedom.’ Why doesn’t Meshaal come and fight instead of leaving his own people to die and suffer?” Yousif told his brothers: “Don’t quarrel.”

Gaza has become a sequestered place; of water hauled in buckets, power outages, funerals, patients stacked in hospitals, fires in the night, evacuation leaflets fluttering to the ground, and militants creeping along walls and crawling through tunnels to ambush Israeli tanks. One man said every day is like a slap in the face—waiting, knowing it is coming, but never having time to duck.

My Journey to Turkey

In 2011, I moved to Istanbul, Turkey. Due to my academic interests, I found a good platform by writing articles and academic papers about Palestinian refugees. An unforgettable story was that of Abu Jihad, a Palestinian businessman who has lived in Istanbul for more than twenty-five years, exporting goods to Gaza for most all of that time. “For God’s sake,” he said over coffee, “Why should I pay all that money to the Israeli customs services? Why don’t we have our own seaport with international observers if Israel is so afraid of smuggling weapons?” He continued, “With all of Israel’s restrictions and constraints, every war it wages on the people of Gaza makes Hamas emerge stronger, so why does it continue with its stupid policy of besieging Gaza?”

Abu Jihad recalled that according to the Oslo Accords, the international community had pledged a seaport for Gaza. “Why didn’t we mobilize all efforts to renew that promise?” Such a move, he insisted, would be enormously important, practically and symbolically. “Israel is squeezing our people economically by controlling everything, and taking the taxes imposed on our products,” he added. “By confining our young people in the biggest open prison in the history

of mankind, it will lead Palestinian youth to disbelieve in the value of human rights. That's why this status quo has to be breached and the international community must create a new opening for Gaza."

For the Palestinians in Gaza, a floating harbor would be a breakthrough towards real sovereignty. It embodies the aspiration to end the suffocating blockade on the enclave. Such an outlet would pave the way to economic independence that would reduce the Strip's reliance on increasingly hostile neighbors, with Israel on one side and Egypt on the other. When the concept was proposed by Oslo in 1993, Egypt, the European Union, and the United Nations were supportive of a floating pier under international supervision, to alleviate Israeli security concerns. Unfortunately, no tangible steps were ever taken and the idea has been frozen for years.

Joining TRT World

A major turning point in my life came in 2016 when I joined TRT World, Turkey's first international English-language channel. The war in Syria and the people's stories from there became my new obsession. I joined a TRT World film crew that was one of the first to enter Idlib province in northern Syria in years. Throughout the Syrian conflict, a number of hospitals had been targeted in air strikes, and many of them in southern Idlib.

I still remember the dusty, winding roads that took us to Idlib's Atmeh refugee camp, where 90,000 families were living. Most had been displaced from various provinces to escape the regime's air strikes. Each and every one of them has a unique story. There I start-

ed to comprehend the serious conflict between my profession as a journalist seeking “stories,” and my deep emotions as a Palestinian refugee who has witnessed first-hand what had happened to my own ancestors when they were forcibly evicted from their homes and villages decades ago.

Om Ali is from Hama, and she came to Idlib seeking treatment for her son; he had been suffering from breathing problems for a couple of years. She told me, “There are no pharmacies. I even resorted to alternative medicine and used herbs to treat my son.” I remembered my wife and mother agreeing to bring a midwife to our home because they were afraid to go to the hospital during the war in Gaza, after hearing about the family that had been killed.

As in any war, children have always been the most vulnerable. Idlib is central to the Astana Agreement, which would establish de-escalation zones in Syria. Russia, Iran, and Turkey agreed to it, and the government in Ankara said it might allow more charity organizations to deliver aid to the millions in need. While talking to people at the hospitals, makeshift schools, camps, and markets, it became clear that they had little interest in the political arguments about their country that were taking place thousands of kilometers away. Their priority was simply to take care of their children. Theirs is a generation that has lived through war, and they are hopeful that Syria’s next generation will not have to.

In Sochi, the leaders of Russia, Iran, and Turkey discussed a plan to bring the Syrian war to a close. While the terms of a political agreement were negotiated there, many Syrians inside the country see a future for their country on their terms. Idlib was once known as Idlib al Khadra—or Green Idlib—before the war. Back then, it was known across the country for its agriculture, farming, and cultivation. Now,

on a map showing Syria's rival forces in the war, Idlib is still marked in green, however, now that means it is "rebel-held." The country is now divided along various violent front lines. There is no doubt that Syrians want peace, but the possibilities of that happening are being negotiated by other nations, outside of Syria. Deadlocks in those deals are felt on the ground; those talks directly affect people's lives in the camps and refugees.

While some of Syria's children may not have suffered physically, the effects of the war often run deep. Wiam Khan, the acclaimed filmmaker and teacher told me, "I'm trying to do something for kids in learning, and I'm trying to do something for them as a friendly way to take them back to their childhood. I think they lost a lot of these normal things of other children outside of Syria." Khan knows the normality much of us experience beyond Syria's borders. The elementary school teacher from Homs received a standing ovation at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival for her award-winning film, *Silvered Water*, which documents the regime's siege of her city.

Now Khan runs her nursery inside the Atmeh refugee camp. "I don't want to leave. Sure, I don't want. I was in France many times; I visited Germany, Belgium, Canada. I returned back to my home, to the place where I belong." I asked her if she felt like the world was ignoring Syria. She said, "Yeah. Yeah. It's a big play. It's a big play. But I don't care for that. I believe in my hands and my eyes."

Ghaida al Husain, who teaches at a camp for the internally displaced, trusts her senses too, and she told me she believes the future for her country is bright. "We aim at having a generation that is entirely different from what the regime wants. The regime wants a hollow, loser generation. On the contrary, we want them to be an able generation that is empowered to build our country. We consid-

ered ourselves the bridge that this generation will pass over, and our children will be the backbone for the reconstruction of our society.”

Almost half of Syria's population has been uprooted by this conflict, which is approaching its seventh year. “If all Syrian doctors leave, there will be nobody to cure people's wounds. If all teachers leave, our children will be abandoned. They're innocent,” she said. Over time, the political rhetoric of the international community has changed. For many Syrians, it is almost as unrecognisable from what it once was, as is much of their country.

Abdul Aziz Ajini was a professor of English when the war began. He took part in the early demonstrations against the regime. While talking over a coffee, he explained his vision as a reformist and revolutionist. Regarding politics, he said, “For the average people here, they no longer believe in anything. You know seven years is not a short time, for people to keep believing things are happening on the political level; so people say that they don't care about Astana and Geneva. We want to live peacefully, without the regime, without killing, without aircrafts, tanks, and guns in the streets. That's all that people need,” he said. “Whether in Astana or Geneva or without them. That's what people are thinking about.” Years pass with no substantial change on the ground, he said, and “that's really frustrating.”

He says his biggest regret remains that the regime has pitted Syrians against Syrians. But yet, he was just as hopeful for his people as he had been back in 2011, when many took to the streets. “In 2011, we started fighting for our freedom, for the liberty, for the dignity of our country. So this doesn't go with the idea of fleeing the country,” he said. “I myself was really involved in the revolution right from

the beginning, and I'm still persisting on my right to have a free, Syrian democratic country for everyone here in Syria, and I will stay forever here."

These are just a few perspectives of Syria's civilians over what has become of their country. During the war, Idlib has been seen as a bastion for the opposition—formed by an array of groups, including the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA). After months of infighting and clashes, the FSA is currently held by Hayat Tahrir al Sham—a powerful group formerly linked to Al-Qaeda. They are heavily armed and still holding out against President Bashar al-Assad's forces. People want peace, but exactly who comprises the opposition in Syria today remains murky. Until that's resolved, it's difficult to see how that peace can be achieved. Most civilians long for an end to the conflict, before it is too late for them.

Since our first visit to the area, fighting has calmed down in rebel-held Idlib province, and the people living there had begun to focus on returning to normal life. Of course to do that, they need jobs. One aid group was trying to get people working again by putting them back in the classroom. The classes are provided by Shine, a foundation dedicated to citizen empowerment. One of the inspiring personalities whose story I reported was Rania Kayzer, an American-Syrian entrepreneur who heads the foundation, who had been working in northern Syria for five years.

Kayzer and her colleagues believe that one positive way to solve many problems is through education. She told me, "The reason we established this school is because we understand the need for the economic situation to be reinvented again. We want people to go to school quickly and be able to get a job easily. The most important reason is because we don't want the youth to become radicals,

we want them to be involved in civilian life. Turkey's Red Crescent and its Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) are giving Shine financial support. But the people at Shine hope to find more donors to support bringing more Syrians into classrooms to give them a renewed sense of purpose.

We went to a newly established camp in another location in Idlib province, Alqah camp, which has been home to 90,000 internally displaced Syrians, many of them women. Despite limited resources, a women's vocational training centre was set up for Syrian women to meet, exchange ideas, and learn new skills. The province has been torn apart by seven years of war. To rebuild, it will be heavily dependent on its people—and of course, women. In a conservative culture such as this, this can be difficult. Schemes like the training centre are aiming to challenge that.

Fatma came to the camp a year ago after losing her husband and son during the siege of Aleppo. She is keen to take part in any program that lifts women up and encourages them to play a greater role in society. The centre is run mainly by young foreign volunteers such as Amina, a British activist who came to Idlib in 2016. She believes that, despite the other problems at the camp, empowering women should always be a priority.

Turkey's Intervention

Turkey's cross-border operation, Euphrates Shield, was a unique experience for us to observe, in Jarablus, Syria, where people were trying to throw off the aftereffects of Daesh's control. Vital city re-

sources suffered, and as winter was drawing near, it is not only those in tented refugee camps that struggle. It was early one morning when we met Om Ahmed, who was preparing tea for her family.

Her home had been without main utilities for three years, and though temperatures were mild, winter was approaching. "This room is a house for four families, now we hardly manage. In winter things get worse, especially without electricity, fuel." It was more than a year since vicious fighting damaged buildings and infrastructure, and forced Daesh to flee. Things have improved somewhat, but thousands of displaced people are still in camps, and some are desperate.

After air strikes and bombings, Jarablus is steadily being rebuilt, but restoring gas, water, and electricity is proving difficult. There was little if any maintenance done during the conflict, so it will take years to reconstruct this city. Aid agencies have been on the ground trying their best with aid packages of food, clothing, and blankets. Abu Siraj, the chairman of one organization, told me that the seasonal change will bring more challenges that will stretch his resources. "We are doing our best, but the number of needy people outweigh our capabilities. We mainly focus on the newly displaced people, and that makes other people angry," he said. The one thing that aid agencies cannot give these people is a passage back to a peaceful Syria. That is a distant dream, and now they have nothing but a reality that is likely to be colder and harsher.

Turkey deals with the fact that millions of Syrians have become refugees inside its borders, and there are hundreds of thousands who are internally displaced. Turkey's second massive operation was pending at the time, when news from Syria reported that one woman had been killed and a dozen people injured after a medi-

cal center was hit by mortar shells in Azaz, in northern Syria. The Kurdish militant group, PKK, which is linked to the YPG, the mainly Kurdish militia based in Syria, was being blamed. The incident occurred just ahead of a planned offensive to clear the YPG from the Afrin region of Syria.

More than 300 psychiatric patients were being cared for at this medical facility. Most had been brought there because of the death and destruction they had been exposed to. Tragically, when mortar shells struck, many were forced to experience again the horrors they thought they had escaped. One of the patients had been changing his clothes when, he said, "I heard the sound of the bomb. I was really scared." This mental hospital is the only one of its kind in areas held by Turkish-backed rebel forces. Patients from YPG-held areas like Afrin receive treatment here. "We're scared; we need security. They are bombing us," I was told.

The hospital's administrator said the YPG knew the coordinates of the complex, and still targeted it. The manager of the hospital said many thought the attack was a preemptive strike by the YPG ahead of Turkey's planned intervention in Azaz. The shelling caused spontaneous anti-YPG protests in Azaz. The militia had sent a defiant signal to Turkey, but the outrage at the damage, injuries, and loss of life seemed to have backfired. The patients were taken to safety, but with tensions between Turkey and YPG forces intensifying, safety there is hard to guarantee.

My coverage of "Operation Olive Branch," the campaign to clear the northern border areas of YPG elements, included the story of Abu Steif, who was forced from his home in northern Syria in 2016 by YPG terrorists. He ended up at the refugee camp in Azaz, separated from his family, who are now scattered across Turkey and Syria, and

he doesn't know exactly where. He said, "I used to have five shops for electrical equipment. We were forced to leave our businesses and houses and village. The YPG militia attacked and evicted us. Till this moment we don't know why." Abu Steif said his family had suffered under Daesh, but he the YPG was no better. "We've been told that YPG was supposed to pass through our village to fight Daesh. That was their claim. But they turned to be worse than Daesh."

Amnesty International has criticized the YPG for forcing people out of their homes and demolishing them, saying this amounted to war crimes. The YPG took over Abu Steif's village, Minigh, with support from the Russian air force. The village is close to the Turkish border and is home to a regime air base. Turkey launched the operation in January to drive the YPG out and allow people to return. All three of Abu Steif's sons are now fighting with the FSA, alongside Turkish forces. "Olive branch operation is a very important battle," he said. "Our children in the Free Syrian Army are sacrificing their lives to achieve justice and take back our land. It's a battle for our rights and justice."

Abu Steif waits for the day his whole family can reunite at their village. "Can you imagine that I don't know the whereabouts of my children? I haven't got a chance to see my grandchildren. All what I wish for is to forget these days. I wish I can delete them from my memory, but I'm not sure I'll be able to." He and his friends constantly debate how it all came to this. Some believe the popular revolution was a trap. Others insist Daesh and the YPG hijacked their uprising, and they themselves are partly to blame. But one thing they all agree on is they have had enough of a war they never wanted to begin with.

Refugees Escaped Daesh

I went to southern Turkey to find out from refugees what the defeat of Daesh meant for them. Thousands of people had been driven from their homes by the terrorist group; they escaped into the desert without adequate shelter, food, or water. Many of these people were now in camps, desperate to leave the makeshift tents and the burning sun of the desert, but the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, which control the camps, would not allow anyone to leave. Many I met in the southern Turkish cities of Kilis, Sanliurfa, Hatay, and Reyhanli had managed to flee earlier.

Muamer Alhameed is an agricultural engineer who lived under Daesh rule in Al Mayadeen for more than two years. He escaped to the border city of Kilis in Turkey. He told me, "We used to suffer from two types of terror; on the ground, we had to face Daesh's brutality." However, he said, "One shouldn't forget the terror of Russia, the Syrian regime, and the US-led coalition. In just one air strike, they killed more than one hundred civilians. Daesh didn't kill this number of people during the period they governed Al Mayadeen." Syrians who fled the eastern city said their destroyed home has become a city of ghosts. Many do not have immediate plans of returning. Alhameed and his family have managed to flee the ongoing war in territories held by Daesh, but many others are still trapped. They fear that if Daesh is defeated, there is no guarantee that the regime will not punish them collectively.

After the demise of Daesh, some of its former fighters were being rehabilitated in Syria. A fourteen-year-old Syrian boy had just come out of the country's only rehab centre, and he is gradually returning to life as he knew it. Khalil Abdulghabour was a child when he was forced to join Daesh. After its defeat, he joined the centre and has

been taking de-radicalization courses. He was graduating the day I met him. He told us, "I'll always remember the beautiful days I spent with the guys here. It's difficult to leave this place after spending nine months with these friends. May god reward the people who helped us in this centre."

Khalil was one of more than one hundred men taking courses there. What stood out for him, was becoming fully aware of how he had been misused by Daesh. He explained, "The most important thing I learned in this place is that neither Abo Bakir Al-Baghdady nor his followers should hijack our minds. We simply do not know them, what they represent, where they come from. I am planning to go back to normal life and join my school." The centre has given hope to many families like Khalil's.

His father told us he is pleased to have him back. "Thanks God. After his graduation, Khalil is very different. He deals with the people in a good manner. He does not have that sick mentality and extreme ideology any more." He added that he hoped his son will return to school and catch up with what he missed. "We will sign him up for the ninth grade, he is still a teenager. They tricked him and made him follow their path," he said. More than one hundred former Daesh fighters like Khalil are currently being integrated back into their communities. Staff at the centre say there are probably thousands more in Syria that they will not be able to reach.

My Journey to Somalia

It is well known that Somalia has suffered from a series of devastating droughts and attacks from the terror group Al-Shabab, in which hundreds of thousands of people have died. I covered one

aid group that was making a big difference for many Somalis who had lost families and their homes. Somali children were provided shelter and food at this orphanage. Osama Osman Ali was one such child in the camp. He had lost his sick father four years earlier, because there was no medication available to treat him. Now Ali lives at the orphanage with his five brothers and sisters. Their meals are provided by the Turkish Red Crescent. Ali told me, "Of course, I'm happy because here I get delicious food. I really would like to thank those people from Turkey who come here to help me and my mates."

Somalia was facing its third famine in twenty-five years. More than a quarter million people had died in the last one. When it struck in 2011, the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC) was among the first international aid groups to help; it has not left Somalia since. This is one of the twenty-six orphanages to which TRC delivers a meal every day. The children are here to get an education, but the more urgent need is food. Twenty-two Somali workers have jobs in the bakery and kitchen. They bake 4,000 loaves of bread every day and distribute them to internally displaced people. The more than 75,000 people they help now live on the outskirts of Mogadishu where they fled drought or attacks by Al-Shabab.

Hassan Sheikh Omar is a cook who has been working with the TRC for six years. He said, "I work to help Somalis who are victims of war and famine. This hot bread makes them really happy." Omar and his colleagues also cook for the children at the orphanage, but soon they will have a lot more work to do. Fatih Gulec, the TRC coordinator, told us, "We're supplying food to almost 2,500 orphans. In the coming months we have plans to increase it to 20,000. As you see, the conditions are really horrible. The children lost their families due to the ongoing war. They do need help."

Mother Nature has not been kind to Somalia. People here remember how their relatives starved to death in previous famines. That will not happen to these children, as they have an agency providing for them, but if more aid agencies do not join the effort, many more people are certain to die.

Journalists and Humanitarian Stories

In our “symbiotic” relationship, aid workers become sources, gatekeepers, or eye openers for journalists. Aid workers often complain that journalists have no understanding of the intricacies of the humanitarian issues they cover. They also resent what they consider to be insufficient coverage of their activities. Most journalists who cover humanitarian crises are generalists; a few are war correspondents. To be sure, some are unprepared to grasp the myriad technicalities and exigencies of an aid operation, and most do not appreciate the subtleties of the social, cultural, and political implications of humanitarian intervention, though this is where the underlying stories are in most aid operations.

The Sphere Project, which outlines standards for aid operations, requires aid workers to have knowledge of the disaster-affected population's culture and customs. This standard should also apply to journalists, in my opinion. The trauma and dire circumstances requires great sensitivity. That said, I have found that most aid workers will open up and explain if a journalist takes time to display empathy and some basic awareness of what their tasks entail.

SYRIAN BRIDES OF LEBANON'S BEKAA VALLEY

MARY SALIBA



Syrian kids stand near the garbage dump at a Syrian refugee camp at Gazzi region of Beqaa Valley, east of Beirut in Lebanon on March 21, 2017

Introduction

I would be telling untruths if I wrote about Syrian refugees at an arm's length, capitalizing on notions of journalistic objectivity and news reporting. This was not the case at all during my Lebanon visit in the spring of 2014, when I met and interviewed a number Syrian refugees whilst working for a prominent news organization in the region. My colleagues were creating an interactive web piece for the network to tell the personal stories of Syrian refugees who had fled to Lebanon from Syria. Some were fleeing the violence that erupted with the Syrian revolution, some fled because they lost their homes, and others planned to return to fight against the Syrian government. I tagged along on a field production assignment as my colleagues considered me useful for connecting with refugees during interviews, given my Syrian heritage.

My exposure and interactions with Syrian refugees in Lebanon were highly emotive and personal experiences. My mother is Syrian, born in the early 1950s in a small Christian town, Zaidal, located in Homs province. It was Homs City that birthed the bloody revolution against Syrian President Bashar Al Assad in early 2011. By the late 1950s, my mother's family had moved to Lebanon's Bekaa Valley when she was aged six, to another Christian town, Zahle, legendarily referred to as the "Bride of the Bekaa."

Like many other Syrian families before Lebanon's civil war of 1975, many Syrians relocated to the agriculturally rich Bekaa. Known to be successful farmers, and with a natural tendency to unite and love, they fell naturally into the Lebanese landscape. Syrians were reputed to be honest and skilled workers, and they took various jobs in construction, hospitality, and also arts and crafts. Their poetic persona, and soulful and musical nature made them a perfect fit for Lebanon generally. Such passion, flamboyancy, and love of musical gatherings were warmly welcomed in the town of Zahle.

This iconic backdrop was the perfect setting for my parents' quick and secret marriage in the summer of 1967. Like many Syrian girls, my mother was known for her beauty, causing her to be noticed by my dad when she was a young teenager. The marriage was controversial as her father had not given his consent; my father was even accused of kidnapping my mother. But for my mother, it was passionate consent as she, in her naivety and romantic idealism, strongly desired this dynamic charismatic, rugged Lebanese man.

In the 1950s and 60s, families—just like my mother's—travelled back and forth between Lebanon and Syria easily and frequently. Commuters travelled by public bus, taking less than two hours each

way. Buses leaving Zahle would transport people to Damascus and Homs daily. Commuting, crossing over, and returning was normal, causing natural migration and intermarriage with the Lebanese, with many Syrian families settling in Zahle, watching their children grow and marry into Lebanese families just like my mother and her sister did. The flow between borders reflected a harmonious relationship between the Syrians and the Lebanese, but with events like Lebanon's civil war and the influx of Syrian refugees after 2010, Lebanese hospitality turned into suspicion and hostility.

During my periodic visits to Lebanon from Doha between 2010 and 2015, the number of Syrian refugees kept increasing, making the complaints of the Lebanese louder and more resentful. Claims were made that the "Lebanese government was giving everything to the Syrians," when it was they who were in need. In 2014, there was an overt bitterness towards Syrian refugees in Zahle, as the refugees were squatting in abandoned Lebanese houses, some not paying rent while obtaining UN food vouchers and NGO aid.

I felt disappointed witnessing so much Lebanese hostility, and forced myself to remain silent in the face of harsh complaints made against the Syrians. No one in Zahle seemed to empathise, leaving me alone with rhetorical questions circling in my head: Weren't we all one people? Weren't we all greater Syria not so long ago?

Syrian refugees in a Lebanese landscape

We started our assignment in the Bekaa Valley, just outside of Zahle. We met a twenty-two-year-old Syrian woman and her toddler living at a shelter provided by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). The

centre was difficult to identify as there was no signage indicating it was a safe-haven zone. An NRC representative told us that they wanted to keep their location quiet to keep refugees safe from attack, labour exploitation, and harassment by local Lebanese.

The woman met us wearing black tights, a long-sleeved top, and her hijab was also black. She had a wide smile and her persona was bubbly; she was excited to meet female journalists and share her story. She was living here, in this bare, unfurnished room with her active two-year-old. I couldn't see any furniture or a bathroom, and there was no kitchen, but there was a sink and a small portable electric stove that she used to boil water. She brought my colleague and me tea and water arranged on a silver tray; we were already sitting on the floor and she placed the tray between us and sat down. The scene reminded me of my Syrian grandmother, drinking tea on our living room floor while growing up in Sydney, Australia where we had moved.

The young mother expressed her happiness with being sheltered by the NRC. She said the staff planned to provide her with skills and training to support other female refugees, and they would teach her English. She was clearly excited to learn English; she was highly motivated and expressed her enthusiasm and willingness to empower women in similar situations.

Her enthusiasm continued until my colleague asked about her husband's whereabouts. She told my colleague that her husband was very angry most of the time, and that he couldn't find work in Lebanon. He went missing for days at a time, and she did not know where he was, what he was doing, or whom he was with. When he would return to the refugee centre, he was aggressive, and if she

questioned him about where he had been, he would hit her. Tears rolled down her face and also swelled in our eyes. We listened in silence. She said he had not been like this in Syria, and that he had changed so much since they came to Lebanon as refugees.

We left this young mother and moved on to meet a Syrian refugee worker who was working for a Lebanese human rights NGO, Insaan. This man was highly educated and spoke English perfectly. We met him at a café in Zahle and he shared some experiences of female Syrian refugees in Lebanon. One horrifying story was that of a Syrian mother and her six-year-old daughter. The child was being sexually abused and raped by an elder Lebanese man. He was the landlord of the apartment block where they lived. The mother was aware of the abuse of her child but remained silent, reluctant to file a police report as the man negated her rental fees. I was outraged and felt helpless knowing that even Insaan was aware of this and many similar incidents, but did not have the power to protect children or prosecute offenders due to the failing and ineffective Lebanese justice system.

Christians and Muslims under one roof of love

While most Lebanese in the Bekaa were hostile towards all Syrian refugees, Christians were particularly hostile toward Muslim refugees. Zahle in particular was proud of its Christian culture with large crosses and life-sized statues lining its boulevard, ensuring that Christian culture was dominant in Zahle and would stay that way.

There was, however, one exception to such hostility—a Greek Catholic bishop named Isaam Darwish, who had been born in Damascus, Syria, but served the church mainly in Lebanon. I wanted to visit his church in Zahle as I had heard that he was providing humanitarian aid to all Syrian refugees, regardless of their religion. I remembered him from my childhood as he had spent a few years in Sydney serving at a Lebanese Greek Catholic church my cousins belonged to. After returning to Lebanon, Darwish developed a reputation as a humanitarian, regional peace diplomat, and educator. In a heavily sectarian and politicized country like Lebanon, he was exceptional in that provided aid and support to anyone in need, and did not discriminate against any religion.

Arriving at his church in Zahle during my 2014 visit, I spotted several men moving mattresses from a truck into the courtyard. I approached one man to ask about what they were doing. He explained that the mattresses and other items like blankets and toys were being delivered for Syrian refugees. I found myself confused, noticing the Islamic Relief label on his flack jacket, and seeing in the distance a Muslim couple walk into the church office.

Darwish explained to me later that a true believer in God did not differentiate between people's beliefs. He was very proud and assertive about his coordination with Islamic Relief over the provision of humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees in Zahle and the Bekaa valley. He emphasized that his church was open to every person, and that he was personally dedicated to extending aid, especially to Muslims in need.

Between two worlds: standing at the Zahle-Damascus crossing.

I reconnected with my colleagues in Zahle's town centre as we were scheduled to visit another part of the valley, which bordered Syria and was closest to Damascus. My colleagues had heard about an old couple living there who were extremely ill and medically neglected. We rode in the van and I silently said goodbye to my parent's town of Zahle and to my cousins there. It was always an emotionally intense visit to Zahle, but each time I left, I took a sense of belonging with me.

After we arrived and my colleagues were preparing to visit the elderly couple, I was still feeling emotional leaving Zahle, and I told them I would take a few minutes before rejoining them. I noticed some older women walking down the road. As I got closed I could see they looked exhausted. Their clothes were dirty, their hair unwashed and their skin unclean, yet they still had a youthful glow. I approached them speaking in Arabic. The older woman was responsive and warm, and immediately told me that they had just come from Damascus.

I enquired, "Are you a refugee? Are you fleeing from the Syrian problem?" The woman replied, "We have always been coming in and out of Lebanon, but now with the problems in Syria we are coming more, we have Lebanese papers." She was carrying nothing, not even a bag. She pointed to a girl, who looked about fourteen years old. The teenager was carrying a one-year-old baby. "This is my daughter and grandchild," the woman said.

I started to get even more emotional. I touched the baby's hand trying to ignore his unhealthy condition and the lack of hygiene. It was sunny and very hot for the morning, and sweat had accumulated

on our faces. As I engaged with the baby, the older woman, in reference to her daughter, said, "I married her when she was thirteen; before she was thirteen."

I felt emotionally overwhelmed. I thought it was the heat, but my mind traced back to my mother in Sydney, and her current state of mourning for my brother who had died suddenly in an accident the year before. I imagined my mother as a young Syrian wife carrying my chubby brother when he was a baby. My heart ached for my mother's loss, for her pain, her trials and lost youth, having given birth to my four brothers and sisters by age twenty.

The collective pain and mourning of these Syrian women, and all of these families who were mourning their lost lives, their youth, their country, and their husbands, brought me to tears. As I stood at that intersection between Lebanon and Syria, with thoughts of my parents' emotional despair, I cried for all the sadness of families losing their children in unjust circumstances and for all families who were suffering—Lebanese or Syrian.

The Syrian Opposition Fighter in Lebanon's North

We began our journey to north Lebanon, to Tripoli, to visit a UNHCR camp and to interview two Syrian fighters. The first was a member of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was trying to topple Syrian President Bashar Al Assad and establish a democratic Syria. He was not only from my mother's hometown of Homs, but he owned one of the busiest modern cafés there, Blue Stone, which I had visited several times with my cousins.

Abu Saleh's hair was blonde and his eyes were big and blue. When we entered the apartment where he and his family were seeking refuge, he was welcoming and warm with typical Syrian hospitality. To my surprise it was a normal home, and I did not feel that I was among fighters. The lounge area was spotless and my colleagues and I sat on wooden chairs. Abu Saleh's children were there, and his young wife was preparing lunch in a small kitchen.

His youngest son, ten-year-old Mahmoud, sat with us. My colleague introduced me and said that I was Australian-Lebanese and my mother was originally from Homs. Abu Saleh's eyes lit up and he said in Arabic, "I know Fairouzeh well. I am from a village nearby." He said the café that he had owned there was now gone, since the war.

We talked about Homs, how I went there with my mother many times. We talked about the sweets and the warmth of the culture. It was like talking with a neighbour or an old family friend. There was nothing that seemed violent about him. He appeared to be a loving father, a responsible husband, and a caring member of the community. The environment was informal and I felt at home. Abu Saleh also seemed relaxed and pleased to receive us.

We first asked Abu Saleh about how he had become an FSA fighter. "When the revolution started we heard that the Syrian soldiers were attacking and raping women in Homs," he said. "I went crazy when I heard this, I left everything. I knew I had to fight to protect my sisters from this horror." He had heard that Syrian government soldiers were torturing people. "I will not let this happen to my people," he said dramatically and urgently.

His wife came out from behind the curtain that separated the rooms.

She seemed proud of her husband's choices; it was clear she viewed him as heroic and as an upstanding member of their Syrian community. My colleague asked if she agreed with her husband's decision. "Yes, for the sake of Allah he did this," she said.

"Did you have any military training?" we asked. Abu Saleh confirmed that he had completed the compulsory military service when he was younger. "I know how to use weapons," he said confidently. I asked why he had come to Lebanon, and what he was doing here. "When we were fighting, my brother got killed, he was martyred. In the same fight, my arm got injured," he said, showing us the disfigurement of his forearm, which was still red and swollen. He told us that he came here to undergo surgery in a Lebanese hospital, and that once his arm healed, he planned to return to Homs to continue fighting with the FSA. "And I am taking Mahmoud with me; he will fight with me and if God wills it, he will be a martyr," Abu Saleh announced.

I was shocked and confused hearing this. I asked him to repeat what he had just stated about his ten-year-old son. I started to get upset and angry towards the father, but I stayed silent. My colleague turned to the boy and said, "Wow. You want to fight, do you?" Mahmoud smiled and proudly said yes, nodding in a man-like manner. Abu Saleh told us that Mahmoud knew how to use a gun. They were pleased with their heroic plan to fight against an oppressive government and to defend the Syrian people.

Interrupting the formal and objective flow of the interview, I asked Abu Saleh, "Why are you thinking to do this? Why do you want to go back and fight? What if something happens to you—who will look after your wife? You have kids, and you already lost your brother. And Mahmoud is only ten years old – he has his whole life ahead

of him. Why would you want to take that away? It's not worth your son's life, this crazy war!" I said, clearly getting personal.

Abu Saleh looked at me peacefully and thoughtfully. My emotional plea had caught his attention. I asked, "Why don't you see if you can get a humanitarian visa and apply to be a refugee somewhere else with your family, maybe you can start a new life?" I started to convince him. "Your kids and your wife are young. Don't go back to Syria to fight," I implored him. Abu Saleh raised his eyebrows—as though he had not known of these possibilities before. "Really? Do you think they will give me a visa to take my family to another country?!" he asked hopefully, as his blue eyes beaming.

"Well, yes, you should try. See if you can start a new life with your family away from this war. The war is not going to end for a long time and who knows what will happen to Syria," I said. His friend Mohammad nodded in unison with me and said, "Yes this war is horrible, it destroyed our lives." The mood in the room changed to silence and reflection; the motive to fight for a revolution was now dampened.

In that moment, I recalled why my Lebanese father detested the Syrian government, along with many Lebanese of his generation. They viewed the Syrian regime as authoritarian, stifling not only Syrians, but Lebanese, too, from their personal freedoms. I also knew that my father back in Sydney would not approve of me sitting in Abu Saleh's house, an illegitimate fighter planning to martyr his own child and using Lebanon as a safe haven and its hospitals for recovery, while planning their next phase of war.

My thoughts returned to Abu Saleh's lounge room. There was a short silence but we all agreed that we longed for Syria to return

to what it was once; we all wanted the war to be over. We started saying our goodbyes and giving thanks for the family's hospitality. I kissed the wife on each cheek, shook hands with Mohammad, and stared at Mahmoud, the cuddly, sweet-looking child, wearing a tightly fitted jumper, and I wondered about his fate.

The Syrian Militant Fighter in Tripoli

As we returned to our van, I confessed to my colleagues how emotional and angry I was at Abu Saleh for even considering that his son might become a martyr. My colleagues had had much more experience than me in the field and in the region, and they seemed more removed and less affected by it. We set off to meet another Syrian fighter, this one had been fighting with Jabat Al Nusra – a militant group that was a branch of al-Qaeda.

The driver took many winding turns before we entered a secluded neighbourhood. The houses had not been repaired since the days of Lebanon's civil war. There were blown-out walls and obvious impacts from large bullets. Concrete walls only partly standing were once part of someone's home; it was almost a shantytown. I was a little unclear about the details of where we were or exactly whom we were meeting. We waited in the van, parked in the street in front of a cluster of houses with gaping holes in the walls. There was rubbish all around us. Where on earth are we, I wondered.

This environment seemed more appropriate for a militant fighter; it was rough and felt a little dangerous. There were not any people around, only rubbish. Car parts and broken-down cars lined the streets. Parked outside of a decrepit home, it did not look like any one could possibly live there. Were they squatting in there, I won-

dered. I felt uneasy waiting in this neighbourhood. I did not know what kind of person we were to meet – a member of Al Nusra who identified with the al-Qaeda ideology?

Perhaps the unsettling, bleak grey surroundings caused me apprehension, but I already knew I would not like this fighter. How could I? How could I empathise with people who adopted a hardline extremist interpretation of Islam and wanted this for Syria? How would my extended family in Syria live peacefully under such militant rule and ideology? What would become of their future, I worried.

While waiting for this man, I again felt resentment toward him, because he was a violent fighter inside of Lebanon, taking refuge among the Lebanese, and causing terror in Syria. So many thoughts ran through my head. There was also nervous energy among my colleagues in the van. “Where is he?” my colleague asked.

Finally, a tall man with a thin silhouette emerged from one of the ruined homes. His face was chiseled, with a strong jawline and sharp features, his piercing, green eyes were framed by bushy eyebrows. He looked typically Syrian. When he entered the van, his face was expressionless and his eyes were blank. He seemed mentally preoccupied, extremely serious. and tense. His presence made me nervous and I wondered if he was taking drugs. He had come to take us to meet a Syrian girl, also from Homs, who said she had been raped by Syrian soldiers. Once we reached the café where we were to meet her, the fighter disappeared into the darkness and we did not see him again.

The Bedouins from Homs in UN refuge

We visited the UNHCR camp in Tripoli. I hadn't been to an official refugee camp before, so I wasn't sure what to expect, but I had imagined that the camp would be established and provide secure shelter. My first impression was shock at all the rubbish everywhere, and it wasn't fresh rubbish either. It was decaying and lay like a blanket over the ground. I was mentally digesting the state of this Palestinian camp. I looked closely but could not identify where the actual camp was, all I saw was rubbish and a sea of car tires.

Then I saw people walking toward the tires and actually getting inside of them. We were told by the locals that the Palestinians lived underground. I was finally seeing the Palestinian camp that I had heard about all these years. I was in shock over how a family could sustain living in that environment, and I was certain it was a not a suitable or healthy living environment for any family. I spotted two old men sitting in chairs on top of the rubbish. It was shocking to me that people could live here, let alone survive here. I felt distressed seeing this in my home country.

We walked towards a white plastic sheet dangling from a piece of wood. An older woman came out from behind the plastic; she was the refugee we were meeting. The plastic was her UNHCR campsite for her entire family, including daughters and grandchildren. Again, I was shocked at what I was taking in.

The Syrian grandmother was very hospitable, very warm and welcoming to us. Some of her daughters came outside—there were several of them. One daughter had a two-year-old child; her husband had left the camp when they moved to Lebanon during the conflict. The daughters were lovely, smiling and happy to visit with

us. They seemed like they were living with normal day-to-day considerations, fixing up their living space, thinking about ways to collect money for food. They were a quite a tribe, and later during our discussions they told me they were Bedouins (nomads) from Homs.

The old woman invited us inside the camp. I made an effort to respond naturally, as I didn't want to show my distress at their circumstances. Inside it was damp and dusty. We sat on an old, dirty carpet that smelled like it had been left out in the rain. Underneath the carpet was earth; there was no floor covering. It was dark, but the daylight coming in at the entrance of the tent helped us to see each other's faces.

On one side of the tent was a large bed sheet used to separate the space. The kitchen area was also closed off with a single bed sheet; it was really just a small hole in the darkness. There was no bathroom in sight, and I was not sure where they used the toilet or found water to bathe. There were so many girls in the family, I had no idea how they all fit in there, let alone slept.

The grandmother said the white sheet of plastic and few planks of wood had been given to them by UNHCR. She said it wasn't nearly enough, and she showed us their difficult living conditions. She told us that members of UN staff would drop off a plank of wood or bit of plastic every few months. The vouchers provided to refugees only bought them a few necessities. The rest of the items in the camp had been found in the rubbish or was junk that someone had thrown out. "We try to do what we can, but it's not enough at all for all of us," the grandmother said patiently.

Boys in the camp go out collecting money by selling "chicklets" chewing gum. While we were there, the sons returned after being

out all day, and I was saddened to hear that they had been working all day.

While conversing, I had mentioned that my mother was originally from Homs. The Bedouins received this information with a great deal of excitement. I told them she was from Zaidal, Fairouzeh. This family had been living as Bedouins on the farms in Zaidal. "The dentist from Zaidal comes to check our teeth once in a while, he drives from Zaidal. He's a good man," the grandmother told me. "We don't give him anything, he just does it from his heart." I smiled at that news of people helping one another. I was happy to hear that a medical professional was at least checking in on the tribe.

"I just want to go back to Syria," one of the daughters said, holding her baby. When they arrived here her husband had left the camp and did not come back. "We don't know, he just left us, left me and the baby," she said. "I married him when I was fourteen years old, but we had the baby later," she told me. I looked over at the mother and she nodded and said, "This difficulty my daughter is enduring, but there's nothing we can do."

This daughter, like all the Syrian refugees I had met, had no education, no work experience, and no English language skills. Other than maybe selling something on the street or in a Lebanese shop, she had no way of earning money. We had heard that some Syrian refugees in Lebanon resorted to prostitution or offering sexual favours. I was sickened and angry at the trauma these people were suffering. A Lebanese human rights NGO was trying to assist this mother, but Lebanese courts too often make unenforceable decisions.

No one from the Bedouin tribe expressed any sentiments about the conflict or the revolution. "We just want this to end, we want to go back to Syria," the mother said longingly.

Goodbye Loubnan

A simple thought stayed firm in my mind after departing Lebanon in 2014. Refugees were not some foreign objects or external phenomena to be collected for UN statistics, or scenarios of displacement examined the way that mainstream media tended to dissect them. These were normal, everyday people, more similar to any one of us than can possibly be imagined. They are mothers, fathers, kids, and entire families, caught up in circumstances that none of them ever anticipated or desired. These were the victims, not perpetrators, and those resorting to violence back in Syria were blindsided, thinking that retaliation was the only way they would survive. These refugees were left to fend for themselves after the Syrian government failed to protect them, after the Lebanese government failed to adequately provide for them, and after the United Nations abandoned them. They were completely alone.

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