Sweet tea and cigarettes: a taste of refugee life in Jordan

Rana B Khoury

Among refugees in Jordan, utter boredom – the result of restrictions on mobility, prohibitions on employment, and feelings of marginalisation – is an unmistakable source of anguish.

Much of the media reporting on Syrian refugees highlights their humanitarian struggles, or else their admirable resilience. Both approaches are understandable and realistic but what is missing from these two perspectives is the mundane. Boredom is the passage of days with little to do but dream of the past and fear for the future. Televisions, neighbours and babies punctuate the silence, but barely. What amount of noise can replace a secure career, crops to attend to, or childrens' futures to plan for?

People used to make plans, especially for the return home. "When we came we thought we would stay ten days," one man told me. Another offers what she thought was a more realistic "two months". Two months turned into two years; planning turned into waiting. With cigarettes they burn the minutes away. With sweet tea they swallow their pride, ambition and faith in the future.

To highlight boredom in displacement is not to suggest that Syrian refugees are so comfortable that they enjoy some privileged tedium. The opposite is true. Their boredom results instead from the restrictions on their mobility, prohibitions on employment, and feelings of marginalisation.

One out of every ten people in Jordan is a refugee from Syria. Of the more than 600,000 Syrian registered refugees in Jordan, fewer than one in five reside in the camps. That leaves over half a million mostly living in urban areas throughout central and northern Jordan. Syrians have received food assistance, access to health care and education in government schools, although recent cuts are reducing the generosity of the first few years. In order to make ends meet, many Syrians living in the cities receive private assistance. In Irbid I visited one apartment building housing the families of 'martyrs', rebels killed in battle; a Syrian donor residing in Saudi Arabia pays for the families' first six months' rent. Others tap into whatever savings they may have, or the profits from belongings sold before leaving Syria, or from selling the pieces of gold jewellery that once adorned their necks and wrists. Some receive money from family members living farther afield, often in the Gulf. After four years, all of these resources are tapering off.

Restriction

Even if they could, few people care to depend solely on assistance. Many venture to work but because the government prohibits them from doing so, the employment is irregular. After having begged her husband to leave the camp, a mother I met had been sending her children to work on construction sites to pay the rent in their new residence. But stories soon reached her about police crackdowns and the deportations of individuals back to Syria. She has since kept the children at home. Another man residing in the outskirts of Amman takes whatever odd jobs he can get, although that has sometimes meant he did not receive his due payment. One mother broke down when recounting how her son eventually went back to Syria to work because "there was nothing for him here". Soon after, "he was martyred".

Mobility is restricted in less formal ways too. Not everyone takes advantage of the Jordanian government's generous policy of enrolling Syrian children in public schools, sometimes because there is no easy mode of transportation for their children to get there. Indeed, high transportation costs are a commonly expressed grievance,

A Syrian family in their apartment in Ramtha, Jordan, February 2014.

keeping at home adults and children alike. Another woman expresses fears for her daughters' safety and honour, so they stay home while the boys go to school.

Another cause of marginalisation is the sense of estrangement born of being an outsider. Individuals have varying interactions with Jordanians, so their impressions are mixed. Some are grateful to particular Jordanian neighbours or sponsors who have assisted them, and others to the government. Even among those who feel more tension with their hosts, they are forgiving of the unenviable position that a small and resource-poor country has found itself in. Others feel distinctly unwanted, and in turn accuse Jordanians of being racist, lazy or greedy.

Peel back these layers of restrictions and marginalisation, and you will find a daily life that is insufferably boring. People are tied to the inside of their residences, small apartments crowded with big families. The world outside is risky, expensive and unwelcoming. Men who attend the mosque for prayer have a reason to go out five times a day. Women, not even that. They pass the time preparing the next meal. The children are wound up; a few hours at school every day would be a mercy.

There are other mercies. Social life and networks persist, although in rarefied form. Feelings of comfort and security are derived from knowing many neighbours and relatives, and from living in the midst of the same customs and traditions. Refugees from the same village in Syria marry one another, and bring children into the world. One woman shows me pictures from her daughter's wedding celebration held in Irbid; most of the 300 invited guests were other refugees from her home town in Dara'a.

Those wedding shots were presented to me on a smartphone. Such devices are lifelines to the outside world, and more importantly to inside Syria. News and updates stream in on rocket attacks and daily casualties. With little else to occupy people's time and much anxiety to fill their minds, these devices are consulted often and eagerly. A man in Za'atari camp related to me how he learned his house was destroyed in a rocket attack: a neighbour sent him a picture of the rubble on his mobile phone. He remained unaffected as he spoke – he had a cigarette in one hand and was pouring me a glass of sweet tea with the other. Tragedy, turned quotidian.

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