Breaking new ground in Jordan

FLORIAN GUCKELSBERGER 3 June 2016

Five years ago Syria’s uprising began and the ensuing war forced millions to flee to neighboring Jordan, a land whose present holds some lessons for Europe’s future.

Earlier this year, Jordan made the world a proposal: government speaker Mohammed Momani promised it would help any country that pledged itself to take in several thousand refugees currently camped out in the wilderness between Syria and Jordan. Jordan had reached its limit of capacity. But still there weren’t any takers and so 27,000 refugees have been waiting in this no-man’s-land until today.

Jordan’s offer to help the international community in shipping off its refugees was to be sure disingenuous. Not an invitation but rather a request from a country whose own population of about six million people faces the challenge of hosting roughly three million refugees, according to the latest census. Among

them 1.3 million Syrians. A country which realized that the rest of the world had scarcely cared about this huge burden before seeing photos of a dead child washed up on a Turkish shore.

The deserts of the Middle East are a regular backdrop for drama. But as Europe plummets into desperation about dealing with Syrians, the region no longer makes the continent’s front pages. So little attention is paid to its current tragedies that they no longer reach the public consciousness. This is a shame, because the realities of the Arab present foreshadow Europe’s own future. The people that flee violence even during the cold winter months and arrive at European shores in their thousands, are driftwood in a merciless tide of globalization.

They are what connects the war in Syria with the West. They are living proof that Europe and the Middle East are much closer than their geographic distance suggests. Globalization has turned us into neighbors. So in order to really learn about the opportunities and risks of mass migration, you need to listen to the stories of people here in the Middle East.

The Jordanian desert is a place that both tells stories about the brutality of the war in Syria and the tenacity of its victims. This tour through Jordan starts in Zaatari, the region’s largest refugee camp.

Chapter 1: the refugees

When the day begins to close, they climb up Telephone Hill. Zaatari looks vivid then, with the setting desert sun’s last rays bouncing off the containers’ single-pane windows spraying the camp with colors. For a few seconds, the light distracts from the sadness of this place. Having arrived at the top of the hill, Syrian refugees erect their arms towards the sky, cellphones in hand. They chase invisible waves, hoping for their devices to connect to Syrian networks which would allow them to talk to their loved ones on the other side of the border.

Zaatari Camp is the display case of the Syrian refugee crisis. Here you can see it all: Jordan’s hospitality, Syrian resilience, and the well-oiled machinery of international aid. It’s a camp so vast that it is visible from space. So sprawling that its streets bear names. And so important that it warranted its own Twitter account, which has 14,000 followers.

Sometimes, when the wind blows in from the north, it carries the thundering sound of the Syrian war into the camp. It’s the theme song of the tragedy these people ran from, which has relentlessly followed them. It is the sound of bombs falling onto Daraa, a Syrian city just 60 kilometers away. The city is considered ground zero of the Syrian revolution, and it’s where more than half of the 80,000
people currently living at Zaatari have come from. Standing on Telephone Hill, they can listen to their home being razed, while they wait for any good news from the very same place.

Ahmad_EN

One of them is Ahmad. His tired eyes look out from behind a pair of twisted spectacles, a cheap metal frame. He stands in a crooked posture as he extends a rough hand. Ahmad used to sell fabrics in Syria, had his own home. Now, the carpet in his living container soaks up rainwater, and when it stays dry, little grains of sand invade every last corner.

“Everybody who knows Syria knows that it is paradise.” The old man’s eyes fill with tears, and his son, sitting next to him on the floor, stares blankly to the ground. The only person in good spirits is his grandchild, crawling and babbling across the floor, one of 5,000 newborns that has never known another place but Zaatari.

When the camp was opened in the summer of 2012, the Jordanians rather pragmatically named it after the nearest town. But the name has come to represent the largest refugee camp in Jordan, and no longer the small town with its mosque, air force base, and world famous name. It appears placid and insignificant next to the city that has emerged, in record time, right next to it. Jordanian officials don’t like referring to Zaatari as a “city”; but you could be forgiven for thinking it was. Only the massive steel beams of power lines standing in the middle of the camp remind you that this is all a product of improvisation.

Zaatari, may only have briefly been the second largest camp in the world, but the most famous of them all. Located just a 90-minute drive away from Jordan’s capital, Amman, it has hosted a whole array of prominent visitors: politicians, musicians, actors and kings, all have drifted in and out of Zaatari, shaking hands, caressing heads, expressing their sympathy. Everyone has heard of it. But the camp’s residents nevertheless feel forgotten by the world.

Anwar, a man in his mid-twenties, has aged quickly. His voice sounds bitter when he talks between long drags from his cigarette. He mentions desperate families and friends suffering from cancer, that neither the United Nations nor the many aid organizations working at Zaatari will treat.
But Zaatari isn’t devoid of hope, quite to the contrary. Roam between the containers and you see glimpses of new lives emerging. Left to their own devices, the residents have turned improvisation into a form of art. Anwar, the chain-smoker, proudly shows off the inner courtyard which he built for himself and his family by connecting two adjacent containers with a piece of corrugated metal functioning as a roof. To visit him, you have to duck your head and slip under a fragrant line of freshly-laundered clothes while passing his washing room, which he built himself.

His dream, Anwar says, is to build up a circus at Zaatari. Before the Syrian revolution, he used to work with some of the French performers of the Cirque du Soleil. Now he trains a couple of dozen kids at the camp, teaching them the backflip, somersault, and handstand. In the rooms of a UN-supported woman’s project, the 6 to 9 year old refugees have concentrated faces as they run, jump and land safely on a mat, high-fiving each other for each successful trick. From the edges of the hall, their mothers carefully watch them, with the expressions anyone who has ever invited their family to an awards ceremony knows.

Only children who regularly attend one of the camp’s schools are allowed to participate. Anwar has strict rules, wanting to imbue the kids with values and teach them not to give up. It may be a daily struggle for most of Zaatari’s residents, but many grow in their attempts to retain control over their own lives despite the camp.

And so they open barber shops in the middle of the desert, where they trim beards and cut hair. They open restaurants, trade electronics and rent out bridal gowns. Through some backchannel, an old gas stove and dough-roller have made it to the camp, and now there is Syrian pizza sprinkled with tomatoes and cheese, as well as the spices of a cuisine that is an integral aspect of national pride. Its smell wafts through the air as baker Abu Mohammed turns on the gas knobs to skillfully roast the flat pieces of dough. He takes orders on his cellphone, then sends out one of the neighborhood boys on a rickety old men’s
bike to deliver the food. Thus, the residents of Zaatar bear witness to the human spirit, to the will not just to survive but to actively improve our circumstances.

Statistically speaking, refugee camps exist on average for two decades. In 2012, when Zaatar was set up, it was designed for five years, meaning that it should close at the end of next year.

But neither the Jordanian officials nor the refugees buy into that illusion. Anwar, Ahmed, Abu and the other refugees have long since started turning the camp into their new home.

Chapter 2: the helpers

When the smurfs walk across Zaatar, they get stopped at each street corner. People implore them to help, burden them with their sorrows. “Smurfs” are the employees of the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN’s food program, called that thanks to their blue uniforms. Jonathan Campbell is the head of the Jordanian refugee program — effectively Papa Smurf — and has been working at the camp for years. Cynics would say that he oversees the scarcity.

But Campbell is no cynic and should he be frustrated, neither his handshake nor his well-mannered expression belie it. He chooses his words diplomatically. Talks about “challenges” rather than problems. Only sometimes does he emit a sigh.

“When I began working at Zaatar, 18,000 people lived here”, he recounts. “Shortly afterwards, that number went up to 120,000.” Today, the WFP passes out 350,000 loaves of bread every day — for the 100,000 Syrians in Zaatar and Azraq, the other large Jordanian camp.

Campbell and his team follow the guidelines set by the United Nation’s refugee commission, the UNHCR. Each refugee is entitled to 2100 calories and 20 litres of fresh water a day. To put that into perspective: your average Austrian consumes 3800 calories and around 200 litres of water each day.
poorest of the poor. Those who still have little resources themselves receive half of that. But even that modest aid, amounting to less than a dollar a day, had to be reduced – and sometimes suspended – during the summer. "We can only redistribute what states give us", sighs Campbell, finally. "It wasn’t until last fall, when the refugee crisis started making headlines, that the situation has improved."

There is much less hope inside the waiting room of Dr. Jonathan Gootnan. People sit on squalid benches, holding screaming babies, coughing and sneezing. Faces are skewed with pain, and breaths rattle. "We have to make do with the bare minimum", says Gootnan, a volunteer from the United States. Behind him, your gaze falls on a bone saw and some disinfectant. He claps a patient on the back, asks him to cough, and listens through his stethoscope. He tells us that children especially suffer from the fine particles of desert sand that accumulate in their little lungs. That he and his colleagues have hundreds of patients to care for, and that they are frequently forced to capitulate due to the circumstances. People at the camp who get cancer have particularly slim chances.

"Syrians are extremely tough, but even they can’t survive without the bare essentials", summarizes Campbell. "During the winter, it’s hard to cross the Mediterranean, but I fear that Europe will see the next big wave of refugees come in spring." With his words, he also connects the Middle East and Europe, describing them as closer and closer neighbors in an ever-globalizing world.

Anyone who can’t make it in Jordan will seek their luck elsewhere. And refugees have hardly anything to lose. The UNHCR estimates its yearly funding needs for the work in Jordan at USD 1.2 billion. By the end of February, just a little more than 60 percent of that amount had arrived. Considering that gap in per cent, the situation in Jordan is even more dire than in the rest of the world, where the UN has calculated a funding gap of USD 15 billion out of a total need of 40 billion for humanitarian supplies.

Around two dozen aid organizations nevertheless do what they can to make life at Zaatari as pleasant as possible. They host projects for women, stage movie screenings, build kindergartens, schools, mosques and even a soccer team. There is a palpable sense of gratitude among the Syrians. Yes, they have been received well. Yes, the Jordanians are good hosts. But at night, when the sun sets, the Americans, Britons, French, Italians, Japanese and Germans get into their white trucks and drive back to Amman. They leave behind the Syrians in their containers, surrounded by Jordanian military posts, and it isn’t quite clear if they are watching or protecting the refugees.

Despite all efforts, the situation is dire. So dire that many Syrians pack their bags and leave the camp. In April of 2013, Zaatari was home to more than 220,000 refugees, a number that went down to 80,000 in a year – and a trend set to continue. On the dusty circular road surrounding the camp’s outer perimeter, you can see the occasional coach. It shuttles people to the border. The early- morning lines to get on rival those of the daily food distribution. Even
though it isn’t even clear where the journey ends. Some hope for a new life in
their old homes, but for many Syria is just the first stop on their long journey
towards Europe.

Chapter 3: the hosts

If you take a taxi from Queen Alia International Airport to Amman, look out of
the window and talk to the driver, you will learn two things. You will learn right
from the get-go that there is a difference between Jordanian and Palestinian
Jordanians: “Oh, you’re from Germany! I am a Palestinian Jordanian!” And you
will see refugees, groups of them standing or camping on the side of the road.
Often with heavy baggage, always in worn-out shoes. These observations are
complementary, describing past, present and future of Jordan; a country whose
history is that of migration.

Marij Al Hamam Park lies to the south of the big city. Here, Lina spreads out a
blanket on the grass. The air is cooler, cleaner than it is in the city center, and
there are less honking cars. Lina wears a combination of white hijab and dark
dress, covering her properly. She has friendly, round eyes, from which she looks
out just a little tensely. Lina wants today to be a beautiful day. Not for herself,
but for the Syrians she has invited to the park. Bowls full of food stand ready,
as always when Jordanians get together. Lisa has brought make-up for the kids,
hand puppets, too. The crocodile is the children’s favorite.

As she carefully paints a moustache on a serious-looking girl, Lina recounts
how she got started: “Two years ago, friends told me about a pregnant Syrian
woman, who was spending the winter in a tent.” Even though Amman is in the
desert, there is regular snow fall in its higher areas. So Lina organized a flat for
the homeless mother and her child.

The Jordanians have reason to be proud of their hospitality, which they call
Nakhwa. Cab drivers, politicians, fruit vendors – nobody tires of mentioning it.
And when you go out with Jordanians, you can indeed leave your wallet at
home. Shame on the visitor who tries to pay his or her own bill, shame on the
dinner guest who eats less than three heaping plates of rice, hummus, falafel
and chicken. Just like Lina, many people give their everything to ease the life of
Syrians in their new home.

In the north, it’s even easier to help, since many Syrians stay with their relatives
south of the border. But there are lots of helpers in Amman, where social ties
are weaker, as there are in any metropolis. You meet Jordanians who use their
little spare time to scrape together enough money for refugees’ surgeries, and
others who spend their weekends selling knitted or baked goods to get one or
two people through the winter. They are everyday Jordanians, who postpone
their rent payment, donate food, or watch kids while their parents try to make
some money on a day-job.

“I help refugees because I am one of them”, explains Lina. “We are Jordanians
with Palestinian roots, and just like the Jordanians once helped us, we help
today.” She refers to the roughly two million Palestinians that live in Jordan
according to the UN, most are Jordanian citizens. According to unofficial
estimates, Palestinians make up 70 per cent of the total population.
But it isn’t just them or the Syrians that have characterized the country. During the founding years, Circassians, Armenians, and Chechhians came to help the young monarchy become an economic success. Since the 1990s, hundreds of Iraqis came, fleeing Saddam Hussein’s violent regime. By the end of 2014, hosting 650,000 registered refugees from Syria alone gave Jordan the second-largest refugee population in the world when set in relation to the size of the native population – and even in absolute numbers it comes in sixth. Jordan embodies the oft-quoted melting pot of cultures. And coexistence isn’t always easy.

“So some people fear for their identity”, says Daoud Kuttab and leans back into his heavy leather chair. The journalist sits in an office decorated with thankyou letters, prizes, certificates, and photos of himself with the country’s powerful elite. He is the founder of the radio station Al Balad and has established Amman Net as a platform for investigative journalism. His political commentary is sharply worded and informed. He can afford to risk more than other journalists, and he does. His team had just exposed corrupt civil servants for issuing coveted work permits for around 20 euros. That’s no way to make friends among the administration.

Kuttab also believes in Jordanian hospitality, but doesn’t fail to mention conflicting identities. “There are Jordanian nationalists”, he says, “that feel threatened by the immigrants.” Kuttab calls theirs an “East Bank” identity, referring to the banks of the river Jordan which separate the country from the Palestinian West Bank. “The nationalists have never accepted that Jordan is a country for all of its people, not just for a particular tribe.” The descendants of the Bedouin people form the bedrock of today’s monarchy, they fill key positions in the military, police and secret service. Career-conscious Palestinians therefore prefer to enter the private sector. Speak to any Palestinian Jordanian and you can hear their frustration. Bedouins, they say, are savages on camels. Palestine, in contrast, is a holy land, the cradle of Arab civilization.

With this conflict in mind, it’s no wonder that the Syrian arrivals have to fight for their place in Jordan’s multilayered society. “It’s a popular sport to blame any ills on the Syrians”, says Kuttab.

Sometimes, the fears seem banal, like the rumor that Syrian women, famed for their beauty and obedience, will seduce Jordanian men - an analogous stereotype to the European fear that Arab men will lure and abuse European girls.

“But some even blame the traffic congestion in Amman on the refugees”, says Kuttab, shaking his head in disbelief. “Some radio hosts incite their listeners by telling them that migrants steal their jobs” – a claim Kuttab considers flat-out wrong. “Most Syrians have no work permits and are forced to accept jobs most Jordanians wouldn’t want” If anything, the refugees compete with Egyptian migrant workers, he adds. And what about the claim that the Syrians are behind the hike in rental prices? “That’s a short-sighted argument”, says Kuttab pointing out that rising rents directly benefit the Jordanian home owners.

But the journalist has omitted a sensitive question – has Jordan profited from its migrants? Kuttab believes it has. Other people share his sentiment, but don’t want to be quoted. In December, when the Jordanian Identity Center published the same finding in a report, this sparked heated debate. Trying to answer that question hits on many societal and political nerves; among them that Jordan is usually portrayed as a victim of the war in Syria, a tale it uses to request massive financial aid from the international community.

As with many complex economic questions, it’s hard to arrive at a conclusive answer. Look no further than the country’s GDP: according to the World Bank, the Jordanian economy steadily grew by around eight percent per year before the war in Syria. Since 2010, that indicator has fallen to between two and three percent. While a UN-sponsored report of the Jordan Resilience Fund assumes that it would have been twice as high without refugees, critics argue that the statistics are skewed. Three percent, they say, is an impressive number and only seems problematic when contrasted with the unusually high growth of previous years. And the referenced growth itself was the result of two previous
waves of migrants from Iraq, one in the 1990s, the other following the US-led invasion in 2003. Businessmen with cash-stuffed suitcases fled to Amman and caused what is now remembered as "the golden years". It's a delicate argument, aimed not just at eliminating the fear of refugees, but also casting them in the role of engine of economic growth.

It would be a mistake to expect another economic miracle from the mostly poor Syrians. But the appeal of two mayors illustrates their benefit to local communities. The two politicians from Zaatari and Mafraq have rallied to help Syrians, to grant them the right to stay and work. Kuttab has his own take. Refugees need water, food, clothing, electricity, and a place to stay. The Jordanians providing it are being paid – directly by the Syrians, by one of the many aid organizations, or the United Nations. The World Food Programme alone has invested more than USD 400 million in the local economy.

No wonder a process of rethinking the potential risks and benefits of the crisis takes place in Jordan. During an international donor conference in London this February it was announced that labour-intensive sectors might be opened to refugees and Syrians will be allowed to work in Special Economic Zones. Some weeks later, in March, the government announced that up to 200,000 refugees will receive work permits. In exchange the EU grants Jordan better access to the European market.

Refugees need help, but they are also consumers. They need support, but they offer potential. Refugees, then, aren't dangerous or beneficial all by themselves. Mass migration is an opportunity and a risk, both in Jordan and in Europe. The ultimate outcome isn't set in stone but something determined by society.

Chapter 4: the visionaries

Loay Malameh, 28 years old, has just founded his second startup, and says things like this: “The Syrians aren’t a problem, but an opportunity.” The Jordanian entrepreneur is in his office at King Hussein Business Park, in the west of Amman. His neighbors are Microsoft, Oracle, and Cisco. “We need to integrate the refugees into our economy rather than use them for additional aid money”, he says. “There is so much potential”.

To harness it, Malameh and his American co-founder Dave Levin have bet on technology. Soldering irons, naked wires, half-empty coffee cups and half a dozen devices about the size of a beer crate fill the offices of their company Refugee Open Ware. The startup is a public benefit subsidiary of the commercial firm 3D MENA, and its office looks like the famed garages of Silicon Valley. The devices they build are 3D printers. Instead of ink, they spray liquid plastic to construct, millimeter by millimeter, any object you can think off.

“We are using technology to help people”, says Malameh, pointing to a black hand prosthetic with movable fingers. “Traditionally manufactured prosthetics are expensive. “This one”, he demonstrates its moving joint and clasping fingers, “costs USD 75 and can even be used to pick things up.”
But 3D printed limbs for the thousands of Syrians injured in the war is only the beginning. Malameh and Levin want to build a chain of open workshops where people – regardless of whether they are Syrians or Jordanians – can work with this technology. They will teach them how to program 3D printers or use laser cutters. “We want people to solve their own problems instead of waiting for others to do it for them”, Malameh explains. Their pilot project in Irbid, a city in northern Jordan, has received several millions in EU funding.

For Kilian Kleinschmidt, a German, it is projects like this that make “his third life” so exciting. Kleinschmidt is in his mid-fifties, and his face has the color of someone who spends a lot of time outside. He started out as a goat herder in France, then worked in development aid in some of the world’s toughest regions, and now is an entrepreneur on a special mission.

Calling him a rock star of development cooperation wouldn’t be completely wrong. The US magazine New Yorker nicknamed Kleinschmidt „Major of Zaatari”, after the UN had asked Kleinschmidt to lead the refugee camp in 2013. Mentioning this unofficial title has a visceral effect among his former colleagues, who struggle not to roll their eyes.

Kleinschmidt says things like: “We call someone a refugee and then assume we know what they need.” His critique is a full-on attack on the way the international community conducts development aid, and Kleinschmidt wants to change the way of dealing with refugees in general.

“The Syrians at Zaatari have demonstrated that they want to make their own decisions. That’s why they built up their own businesses – it’s their road back to individuality and towards their own identity. A humanitarian system can’t provide that”, Kleinschmidt says and recalls the conditions at the camp when he was hired. “It wasn’t love at first or second sight. More like fifth. It was brutal. Journalists called the camp ‘the pit of hell’, and who could blame them? How can you love something designed to hold people?”

The US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants uses the term “refugee warehousing” to describe overburdened governments that park the newly arrived in camps and cut them off from the rest of society. The American NGO considers this a global, not just a Jordanian problem: when migrants are deprived of basic rights like the freedom of movement and work permits they will forever remain in a state of dependency, the NGO criticizes. In turn, the resulting boredom and desperation causes violence against anything and everything.

“When I arrived at Zaatari, the team of UNHCR was completely intimidated”, Kleinschmidt remembers. “Cynicism was rampant and motivation was low. Every day was stressful.” Visiting the camp today, you no longer get that impression, and many people attribute that to letting the refugees participate. “It is humiliating to be told, for weeks and months, how to live and when and what to eat.” Kleinschmidt’s team decided to turn the system on its head.

Instead of distributing food, they established supermarkets where refugees were able to make their own decisions about what to eat. When the living containers, neatly arranged by crane, were moved, the team accepted it. And
when there were problems, they made a point of first listening to the refugees instead of calling the police. “People have shown us how to transform a refugee camp into a refugee home”, says Kleinschmidt.

Not everybody likes that development. Azraq, the second largest camp in Jordan, is organized very differently. Journalists aren’t as welcome there, and those who have been describe it as Zaatari’s polar opposite: straight roads, no shops, and an artificial and dull atmosphere. “The officials want no second Zaatari”, a long-time UN employee declares. And since every infrastructure project is a social undertaking, the message to refugees seems clear: “Don’t make yourselves at home.”

Kleinschmidt no longer works at Zaatari, but keeps working for its inhabitants. As founder of the Viennese Innovation and Planning Agency, he wants to network global resources: “It’s unacceptable that everything required for sustainable aid already exists, but that it doesn’t reach the refugees”, he exclaims. Kleinschmidt wants his company to operate between these different worlds.

“Everyone can help turn refugee camps into better places”, he insists. The goal is to bring knowledge and resources to places where they do good. He has already persuaded the Amsterdam water works to run a sewage treatment facility in Zaatari. And he inspires IT stakeholders like IBM and Microsoft to leverage their knowledge about big data to improve the camp’s logistics, while universities contribute tools of modern education. With a nod to the 60 million refugees worldwide, Kleinschmidt notes that refugee camps are the cities of the future. And not only that. They are where integration efforts are put to the test, where it is determined whether societies can truly provide a home for its newest members.

Many Jordanians think it is possible. Travelling across their country, you meet founders, mayors, journalists and volunteers, all united in their quest to make the best of the situation. It would score as an early victory to start listening to them.

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