"To Live, Not to Die"

Syrians Are Seeking Refuge in Neighboring Countries to Escape a Spreading Civil War. Here Are Some of Their Stories.

By Sheera Frenkel

Ali Hamouda has a game he likes to play at the petrol station in northern Jordan where he now works pumping gas.

"That car that just came in belongs to my wife's cousin," Hamouda says, indicating a small red Fiat. "He is so fat that the car leans to one side when he drives it and the wheel always turns to one side."

The blue Honda is owned by a neighbor who is so frugal that he used his children's paints to cover rust stains on his car rather then spring for new bodywork. The white SUV belongs to a rich man in town that everyone knows has crooked business dealings in Lebanon. And the rattling grey Buick, that belongs to the mayor's nosy wife.

Each car is a memory of the life Hamouda has lost. In Daraa, his hometown, the southern city where the uprising against the Bashar Al-Assad regime began in March 2011, he had a black Cadillac that he says he kept in pristine condition. When he drove it through Daraa's streets, he would roll down the windows and chat with his neighbors. In the spring, he would park the car under the blooming jasmine bush in his front yard so when he drove to work in the morning, the sweet scent lingered.

"I remember these things about our lives in Daraa," he says. "I remember my peaceful drive in the morning, before the streets were crowded with traffic. I remember my city when it smelled of jasmine, still and beautiful."

A year ago, when Hamouda fled Daraa with his wife and four children, he took care to cover the Cadillac and ask a neighbor to keep an eye on it until he returned. The street outside his home had become a war zone. "I like to think it is there, waiting for me," he says. "One day my family will go back, and it will be there."

▷ Syrians after crossing the border into Jordan, Mafraq, Feb. 18, 2013. *Mohammad Abu Ghosh/Xinhua/ZUMAPRESS*

Hamouda is relatively fortunate. He is one of thousands of urban refugees who left the sprawling refugee camps for a cramped, one bedroom

apartment he shares with his wife and three daughters. In the villages along Jordan's northern border with Syria, entire neighborhoods are now inhabited by refugees like the Hamouda family, who eke out a living at the gas stations and produce stalls, biding time and trying to create a sense of a home away from home.

"Hope Has Really Been Broken"

Even as thousands more Syrian refugees arrive in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey each day, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has warned that it will soon be out of money to cope for the vast needs of the community. In June, the money will run dry for the camps in Jordan, and United Nations officials estimate that a few months later, Turkey and Lebanon will follow.

Part of the problem is that UNHCR has only received 29 percent of the money it was promised by donor nations, with many countries across the Arab world failing to fulfill the amounts they had originally pledged. But UN officials said a larger problem is that with fighting in Syria still raging, no one can say how long the refugees will need assistance. "The needs are rising exponentially and we are broke," said Marixie Mercado, a UNICEF spokeswoman in an interview with Al Jazeera in April.

Marin Kajdomca, the UN official in charge of the Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan, says that during one peak of the crisis some ten thousand refugees poured into the camp in one week. "There was discontent among people," he recalls. "There was a situation where it was difficult to provide distribution, it was difficult to provide services for them." At one stage a punishing winter storm hit the region, sending temperatures to freezing lows and dumping a blanket of snow on the Zaatari camp.

"It is trauma on top of trauma," says Waheeba Walid, whose four-month-old grandson died during the storm. She explains that the baby had a pre-existing lung condition that was aggravated by the cold and dampness in the camp. "We ran away, out of Syria, to live, not to die," she said.

To date, UNHCR has registered 1.3 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries, a rise of one million people since this same time last year, when the UN said that there were 300,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

"We want to ring the alarm bell. We are at a breaking point," said Panos Moumtzis, the Regional Refugee Coordinator for the Syria at UNHCR. He said that even as projects see the number of refugees continuing to rise, aid money has nearly run out. He said that despite appeals for $1 billion the UN has only received $300 million.

Now, human rights workers and activists helping the refugees are being forced to make impossible choices. Do they cut immunization programs for the children or distribute less foodstuffs to adults? With anywhere between 7,000 to 8,000 new refugees arriving each day, the decisions they make have critical ramifications.

Human rights groups have already warned that the sexual exploitation of women and child labor has begun. Fathers, unable to care for their children, have pushed daughters as young as twelve and thirteen into marriages with wealthy Jordanian or Egyptian husbands that they hope will provide them with the basic staples of life—food and shelter.

Last month, one human rights activist, who shuttles between Lebanon and Jordan, said that she had seen a "change in mood" among the refugees.

"There is the beginning of this feeling of desperation," she said, asking to be quoted anonymously because the international organization she works for had not given her permission to be interviewed. "Families are beginning to consider things they would never consider before—like selling their daughters or even moving the family back to Syria. You see that people's hope has really been broken." The numbers, she said, swell by the day. "When it hit one million a lot of people were shocked. Then the next day 14,000 people became refugees in one day. That should have been more shocking, but nobody took notice," she said

"The Clothes on Our Backs"

"Visit nearly any petrol station in Jordan or southern Turkey, and you will find a Syrian refugee," says Yasmin Khaled. The 26-year-old comes from a wealthy family in Damascus, and has relatives in Beirut. She sits at a trendy café in downtown Amman and sips a green tea chai. "I know I'm one of the lucky ones," she says. "I don't really think of myself as a refugee."

Khaled's family has enough money stashed in bank accounts outside Syria that they can afford to rent an apartment in Amman, in addition to the home they purchased years ago in Lebanon. Khaled says she felt guilt when she saw photos of Syrian children playing in frozen mud in the Zaatari camp.

"I guess most Syrians didn't save for a rainy day," she says. "Nobody really thought that a Syrian person would be forced to beg for charity. It's not our national character." Khaled dreamily described the Syria of her youth as "a rock" and a "safe haven."

Khaled's father, Ibrahim, recalls days long ago that were also troubling for Syrians—the armed conflicts with Israel in 1967 and 1973, the civil war in Lebanon, and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq for example. "She's too young to remember the wars, but I remember them a bit and I heard the stories from my father and my grandfather," he says. "It made me appreciate that I was raising my children in a time of peace."

Syrians watched the wars raging around them with pity, Ibrahim Khaled says. He remembers desperate Lebanese refugees crossing the border into Syria, and Iraqis who arrived clasping plastic bags full of foodstuffs and clothes. "I thought to myself, 'poor them,' and helped some of them find jobs in a factory owned by my brother-in-law," he says. "I would see them sometimes and they looked so empty, so shocked, and I thought to myself, 'Well it is silly they did not prepare.'"

So when the day came that the protests turned violent, Ibrahim Khaled transferred money into foreign bank accounts and kept a close eye on the news. "I was always a pessimist," he recalls. "Everyone thought I was crazy, they said the war would never come to Damascus." In July 2012, after a car bomb in Syria's capital killed four top security officials, including Al-Assad's own brother-in-law, Ibrahim Khaled decided it was time to move his family abroad.

"I didn't want to wait for the day when we would be bombed out of our homes and would leave with just the clothes on our backs," he says. "I've already seen what that looks like."

"We Don't Know What to Believe"

Other Syrian refugees left only when they had no other choice, driven by the near certainty of violence and the prospect of death at home. Some say they can't even remember the moment they became refugees, that it just happened step by step. Salma Fayouk had just finished her university studies and was facing pressure to marry her long-time boyfriend when fighting broke out in her hometown of Aleppo in northern Syria. First her family escaped their apartment on the northern outskirts of the city for a safer neighborhood toward the center. But, after a nearby building was bombed, they decided that the city, too, was unsafe and moved to a relative's home in the countryside.

One day, Fayouk's brother went missing. A few weeks later, the family was told that he had been killed by regime forces. Food became scarce and Fayouk and her sisters started to hear stories of rape and abduction. So the family moved a third time, crossing the border and settling in a refugee camp near the Turkish city of Hatay. Fayouk says that it was only there that she finally understood what had happened to her.

"I became a refugee without even realizing it, and sometimes it is hard to think of myself this way," she says, speaking in a park near the camp. "Just a few years ago, I had a very secure life."

Her parents talk of returning to Syria, but Fayouk and her sisters say they are trying to forge new lives for themselves. One sister is studying Turkish and another is considering an arranged marriage with a wealthy Jordanian relative. The family's oldest son has started doing menial labor on farms around Hatay, but they are afraid he will be caught by Turkish authorities and punished. "We are running out of money but we aren't allowed to work," says Farouk. "It's not fair and we really thought we would be back home by now."

When she thinks back to her friends from university, she suddenly realizes how much has changed in two short years. Some are dead, and many more, she says, are missing. Men she once saw as nerdy engineering students have joined *katibas*, or fighting units, and have posted photos of themselves brandishing AK-47s on Facebook. She knows of families who have sought refuge in countries as far away as Libya and Britain, and others who are internally displaced in Syria, living with distant family in the countryside in villages too small to be of strategic importance to the war being fought around them.

"We are always waiting, watching the news and reading in the newspaper, to find out what is happening back home," she says. "Some women here, their husbands are fighting in Syria and they bring back news that soon Al-Assad will be dead. But it's been a long time that they've been saying this and we don't know what to believe."

"What Syria?"

Along Turkey's border with Syria, not far from the Hatay camp, Syrian men in the makeshift uniforms of various rebel groups can be seen making their way to and from the border. It's a constant reminder of the ongoing fighting, in a war that has already gone on far longer than anyone here expected.

Abu Mohammed used to be a history professor at a university in Aleppo. He asks to be identified by a pseudonym because much of his family remains in Syria, and one of his sons is fighting on the side of the rebels. Most days, Abu Mohammed sits at a small café in Hatay, and sips tea in front of a television tuned to Al Jazeera. "Everyone talks about going back to Syria when the war is over and Al-Assad is dead," he says. "I want to ask them, 'What Syria?' There is no Syria left."

Abu Mohammed explains that because of his reading of history, he knows what a civil war can do to a country. And because he is a Syrian, he knows how truly fragile his country is now. "Maybe we did, for a while, ignore divisions and exist as one country," he says. "But those days are over. Today everyone wants to know: Are you Sunni? Are you Alawite? Are you pro-regime? Or against?"

Recently, he read an article that predicted the Balkanization of Syria, arguing that the country would be divided into warring factions for decades to come. "There is no word for someone who is a refugee but who has no country to go back to," Abu Mohammed says. "Or at least, I don't know that word. If there is, we should start using it for Syrians."