

“So many ways to die in Syria now”: Neil Gaiman visits a refugee camp in Jordan

The conflict in Syria has forced two and a half million people to flee the country. Neil Gaiman visits two refugee camps in Jordan run by UNHCR and hears the stories of some of those who have escaped the violence and terror to rebuild their lives in these cities in the desert

We are in a metal shed in Azraq refugee camp, Jordan, sitting on a low mattress, talking to a couple who have been here since the camp opened two weeks ago. Abu Hani is a good-looking man in his late 40s who looks beaten, like an abused dog. He hangs back. His wife Yalda talks more than he does.

5 There is a water jug on the floor. It is the only water they have. We have managed to knock it over twice, and each time we apologise and feel awful, as in order to refill it there is a five-minute walk to the four taps embedded in concrete at the corner of the block. The desert air dries out the thin carpet in moments.

10 The couple are telling us why they left Syria. Abu Hani once owned a small supermarket, but the “officials” who ran his town trashed it, mixed detergent into the grains and pulses, and took his stock. He spent his savings restocking the shop, but when he opened again they closed him down permanently. People were killed. On the local news they would show bodies that had been found, so people could identify their relatives: one time he saw a cousin’s severed head on there.

15 Mostly their relatives just vanished. Yalda’s brothers and cousin were on their way to deliver blood for a transfusion to their infant nephew who was having an open-heart operation when they were stopped at a roadblock, and interrogated about the blood. The three men did not arrive at the hospital and were never seen again. I did not want to ask what happened to the nephew. Her mother, Yalda tells us, has lost her mind: she goes from police station to hospital to police station, asking about her sons – the police got so tired of this they wrote “deceased” next to their names, to make her stop coming and asking.

20 Abu Hani and Yalda tell us about the border crossing into Jordan, how they tried to leave their town without bribing a checkpoint officer, and how Abu Hani was taken into the office by the official and punched, kicked and jumped on in front of his wife and children for an hour and a half. All their money was taken from them. They left that checkpoint with him covered in blood, concussed, barely able to move and penniless.

25 “We woke up every morning glad we were alive, and went to sleep every night knowing we might not wake in the morning. There are so many ways to die in Syria now,” says Yalda. Their relatives have been imprisoned, gone missing, been murdered and killed in explosions.

The couple borrowed money from friends and the next time they went through the checkpoint, the same now-heavily bribed officer saluted them. They reached the Jordanian border with nothing.

30 “I was scared of the Jordanian army on the border,” Yalda says. “I thought, if the uniforms on the Syrian side were so brutal... But when we crossed, the Jordanian army helped us, and welcomed us with a smile.” She tells us they were given biscuits and water and blankets by the army, provided by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). “I got to the camp, and I felt like a child being welcomed by its mother,” she tells me.

35 I have not thought of Azraq camp as welcoming until now. A ghost town that opened at the end of April, it currently holds around 4,000 people but is designed to accommodate 130,000 in its square white metal huts. It feels like the least welcoming place in the world, the only sign of life or colour or individuality is the washing we see fluttering between buildings.

Abu Hani and Yalda now both have jobs in the camp. She greets new arrivals and he works as a porter for them (although people know he has back injuries and they give him light work). They want to save enough in the camp to replace broken hearing aids for two of their four children, both of whom are deaf. They worry that if she does not hear anything, their five-year-old daughter will forget the words she already knows how to speak.

We walk to the water supply to refill the family's jerry cans and make up for what we spilled, but no water comes out. They are waiting for the supply trucks to arrive. Jordan is the fourth driest country in the world, and every drop of water in the camps is driven there from outside boreholes.

The crisis in Syria, the unrest that became a civil war that became a nightmare, created, as all wars have created since human beings started living in villages, refugees. They left their houses, if their houses were still standing, and they went somewhere else, somewhere they might at least be safe.

More than two and a half million people have fled the country in the past two years, and more than 600,000 of them have gone to Jordan. The Jordanian people and government have shown exceptional generosity. There are six million people in Jordan: the Syrian refugees make up 10% of the population. If Britain were to do the same proportionally, it would mean accepting about six and a half million refugees.

Syrians have come to Jordan because they speak the same language, have similar cultures and often relatives there, and because Jordan historically has taken in refugees – Palestinians, Iraqis and Kuwaitis have all fled there over the years. Sometimes they have even gone home again.

UNHCR doesn't like camps. The money that is spent running their infrastructure is money that could be spent on more direct support to people living in their own homes. But as the towns and the cities and urban centres have filled up, with a thousand refugees coming in every night, men and women and children, camps have become a necessity. They had two weeks to open the first one, Zaatari – planned for 5,000 people, it grew to hold its current population of 100,000.

Before I came out here, I tried to imagine what a refugee camp would be like. It would consist of several rows of tents in a field. It would be dusty, of course, because the field was in Jordan, where it is dry, and it would be a big field, because there were a lot of refugees. I had not imagined cities. Where Azraq is a ghost city of white boxes in a flint and lava desert, Zaatari is an anarchic dusty city of tents and box-like people-containers, in which every streetlight is covered with a wild spaghetti-tangle of wires, stealing electricity to light people's homes, charge their phones and power televisions. Kilian Kleinschmidt, the UNHCR camp manager who is mayor to this "city" of 100,000, has resigned himself to an electricity bill of \$500,000 a month, and now concentrates on putting in boxes on the lamp posts that allow authorised electricians to access the power safely, and urging people to raise the wire tangles up off the ground during the rains. People move house in Zaatari by putting wheels on to repurposed fenceposts, lifting their houses on to them, and hauling them through the streets, while boys jump on and off, like a fairground ride.

I keep trying to work out how I got to Jordan. Things happen because they happen. UNHCR had noticed that when I retweeted their tweets and appeals, more people read them and acted on what they had read, so we spoke, and I linked to their sites, and read the links before I posted them. I volunteered to get more involved, and UNHCR offered to take me to a camp somewhere to show me what was happening. I agreed. [...]

Everyone I talk to in the camps has a nightmare story: they stayed in Syria, going through hell, until they could take no more, and then the journey to the border, with whatever they could carry, normally just a change of clothes for the children, would be a journey across hell. They put their lives at risk, and if they arrived at the border alive, it was worth it.

I look at Azraq camp, with room for another 126,000 people, all of whom will come, most of whom will risk death to get there, and I know that is another 126,000 nightmares.

I realise I have stopped thinking about political divides, about freedom fighters or terrorists, about dictators and armies. I am thinking only of the fragility of civilisation. The lives the refugees had were our lives: they owned corner shops and sold cars, they farmed or worked in factories or owned factories or sold insurance. None of them expected to be running for their lives, leaving everything they had because they

had nothing to come back to, making smuggled border crossings, walking past the dismembered corpses of other people who had tried to make the crossing but had been caught or been betrayed.

90 I keep going, talking to the refugees, to the people who run the camps and care for the refugees, and then, after accompanying Ayman, a Syrian volunteer nurse on his rounds, as he changes the dressings on a youth whose foot was blown off by a landmine and an 11-year-old girl who lost half her jaw in a mortar attack that killed her father, I realise I can't think straight. All I want to do is cry. I think it is just me, but Sam, the cameraman, is crying too.

95 I imagine the world dividing into the people who want to feed their children, and the ones shooting at them. It is probably just an artificial divide but UNHCR is on the side of the people who want to feed their children, on the side of human dignity and respect, and it is rare that you know you have picked the right side. You are on the side of people.

All names of refugees have been changed.

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