



REPORTER AT LARGE

Those we leave behind

Khaled Hosseini, the bestselling author of *The Kite Runner*, goes inside a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan

Artwork from "The Ghosts of Ellis Island" by JR

Some things are simply too big to be taken in all at once. Raise your eyes one night to the sky, to the blackness sprayed with millions of stars, and try seeing all of it, the whole sky. It can't be done. It overwhelms. The best you can do is to fix on a star or two and imagine the sheer vastness of the heavens through them. Sometimes, what

you can't grasp as a whole, you can picture through its parts.

The same could be said about human suffering. What if you read, for instance, that more than 220,000 Syrians have been killed since the start of the war in their country? That 7.6 million are displaced inside Syria, roaming from town to town,

looking for safety? Or that 3.9 million live as refugees in neighbouring countries?

These are important numbers. But it is a hard thing to picture millions of faces all at once. Numbers have a way of making them merge, turning them into a blur of human tragedy, a calamity so sprawling, that it undermines our ability to truly see it.



Shadows of the past: These images come from *Unframed - Ellis Island*, an installation by the pseudonymous graffiti artist JR, who began his career in Paris in the early 2000s. To create them, he used wheat paste – an old tool for fixing graffiti – to attach images of some of the staff and patients to walls and windows at Ellis Island’s Immigrant Hospital, which has been abandoned since 1954. Between 1892 and 1954, Ellis Island, home of the Statue of Liberty, was the processing centre for 12 million immigrants into the United States.

In early May, I went to Jordan with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to meet Syrian refugees. Each encounter reminded me anew of the role of stories; why sometimes they can be more useful than numbers; why we need, for instance, the tale of a Tom Joad to understand the Great Depression. One of my favourite quotations on the subject is from Rudyard Kipling, who said: “If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

To that end, I introduce you to Khalida, a bespectacled 70-year-old woman with jutting cheekbones and a schoolgirl’s laugh. She is from Damascus, where, before the war, she lived a Syrian mother’s dream, surrounded, loved and supported by her nine grown children. But then war broke out, and Khalida learned that armed groups were forcing young men to fight for them by threatening to assault and abuse their mothers. So she made a painful and, to me, stunning choice. She decided to deny the militants this leverage. “I didn’t want to be the reason my sons had to fight,” she says, “so I left everything I had.”

She left everything she had. Three years ago, she left her children, her home, her city. Alone, illiterate and 67, Khalida tore herself from Syria and came to Jordan. She lives alone now on the outskirts of Amman, renting a nearly empty one-room apartment at the bottom of a steep hill. She is forced to do all the things her children used to do for her in her former life: cook, sweep, do laundry, buy groceries. Her greatest expense is rent – although soon she will be receiving help through UNHCR’s cash assistance programme, an initiative that targets the most vulnerable Syrian refugees.

Every day, Khalida climbs the steep, battered steps that lead from her rented room to the main road up the hill. She travels to Madaba, a trip that takes over an hour, requiring her to hitch two different car rides and board two different buses, in order to get to the community centre where she takes literacy classes with a roomful of other Syrian refugees, all women and young girls. Khalida is the oldest and perhaps the most enthusiastic student in the class, because, for her, literacy is now an

indispensable survival skill. She needs to read street signs, bus destinations, the names of her medications. Despite a marked hand tremor, she has diligently filled entire notebooks practising her letters. “When I am given two pages of homework, I do four instead,” she says proudly.

Khalida misses Syria. She misses her home and, most terribly, her children. But she tells me she would rather live alone, even at this late stage, in a foreign country, than go back to Syria and put her sons at risk. Talking to her, I was reminded of Genghis Khan’s famous utterance as he watched his mortal enemy Jalal ad-Din bravely leap into a river on horseback: “Every father should have such a son.”

I marvel at Khalida’s will to survive, the magnitude of her self-sacrifice, her gumption. Indeed, every son should have such a mother.

Unlike Khalida, Adnan, 29, is at the peak of his life, or what should be the peak of his life. The friendly, dark-haired former engineer was studying for his Master’s degree in computing at Damascus University ▶

► when the war started. Checkpoints and the much-feared detainments made it impossible for him to continue his studies. He returned to his family home in the Ghouta region, where his daily life, once filled with friends, colleagues and academics, was now punctuated by gunfire.

Bombs screamed as they plummeted to the ground where, Adnan told me, he lay curled, muttering a panicked mantra: "This time I am going to die. This time I am going to die." What relief he felt at having survived yet another bombing was quickly dashed by the horror of the aftermath, when he walked outside and saw men, women and children crying out in pain, and his neighbours' bodies – "No," Adnan corrects himself, "not bodies, pieces of bodies" – strewn about the streets.

Eventually, Adnan fled to Jordan with his mother and brother, with whom he now lives in the Zaatari camp, home to some 83,000 Syrian refugees. His father is still in Syria, trapped in a besieged area. Adnan is grateful to be alive. He is young. He wants to finish his studies. "We are human beings," he says, face awash in frustration. "We have ambitions, we have dreams that we want to come true." But Adnan's dreams have been butchered, his hopes cut down. Boredom, crushing, ever present, is a foe to be fought daily. He does what he can. He teaches other refugees at the camp computer literacy. He takes part in cultural programmes run by a Syrian youth group. Mostly, though, Adnan waits for Syria's course to right itself, even as he helplessly watches it bend towards yet more ruin.

Adnan's circumstances seem almost luxurious compared with those of Um Anas, a 43-year-old Syrian woman I met near Madaba. Ten months ago, fearing for her kids' lives, she left her home in Heleh, a suburb of Damascus, and fled to Jordan with seven of her children, two of whom, Marwa and Holood, aged 22 and 17, are disabled, born with severe congenital arm and leg malformations. Holood's affliction is particularly heartbreaking. When you first meet her, the nearly non-existent legs, tucked under the hem of her dress, give the illusory impression that her body ends abruptly at the waist.

For five months, Um Anas and her children moved from village to village inside Syria, sometimes on foot, sometimes by car, always looking for a safe place. Um Anas carried Holood on her back, or pushed her in a cart, while her teenaged son carried his older sister. Um Anas thought a lot about the other son and disabled daughter she had left behind in Syria. They still live in a besieged area with Um Anas's husband and his second wife.





Facing page, top: Complementing JR's installation, the cartoonist Art Spiegelman has illustrated the stories of some Ellis Island immigrants. They can be found in the book *The Ghosts of Ellis Island* (published by Damiani, £25).

Above: One in ten of those who passed through the island was deemed not healthy enough to enter America and sent to the hospital.

In Jordan, they first lived in the Azraq camp, now home to some 18,000 Syrian refugees, but Um Anas knew that her disabled daughters would struggle in Azraq, a sprawling camp in a dusty swath of desert. "The ground was very hard and rugged. It's a rocky terrain." With assistance from the children's paternal uncle, the family left the camp after five months and now rents a room in a run-down apartment building near Madaba.

Um Anas and her children are safe in Jordan but they lead a flimsily tethered life. The children get two small meals a day: olives and cheese in the morning, bread and tea in the afternoon for dinner. Um Anas admits that her eldest boy sometimes dumpster-dives to find bread for the family. The children don't attend school. "I cannot afford the uniforms or the travel or the stationery," Um Anas says. She laments the idle nature of her children's lives. "They are absent-minded," she says. "They stare a lot, they have lost concentration, they barely smile." A silver lining for her is that, because of her family's vulnerable state, she will

soon receive around 120 Jordanian dinars (£110) monthly as a beneficiary of UNHCR's cash assistance programme. It will not solve all her problems, or restore all her hopes, but it will help.

"In Syria, I had high hopes, but the war has taken those hopes," Um Anas says. "I have no hope now, apart from my children to get an education."

These are but a few of the myriad stories. Every Syrian refugee has one. They accumulate, the stories, each distinct from the others, each a voice in a chorus. And, collectively, they lead back to the numbers: 7.6 million people internally displaced; 3.9 million refugees.

The numbers, in turn, lead back to us. We have watched the Syrian tragedy grow at an alarming rate. It is now the biggest humanitarian crisis of our time. But the funding to support refugees such as Um Anas has not kept up with the rapid expansion of the crisis. In Jordan alone, for instance, there are currently 16,000 Syrian refugee families that have met the criteria to qualify for UNHCR's cash assistance

programme, yet they remain on a waiting list. The needs of these vulnerable families are officially acknowledged but not met, due to a huge funding shortfall.

If we, as an international community, and as individuals, cannot bridge the funding gap, then we will increasingly see extremely vulnerable families forced to resort to desperate and dangerous coping mechanisms in order simply to survive – child labour, early marriage, prostitution, homelessness. In Jordan, I even heard of some families that have made the decision to return to Syria. Others, having escaped death in Syria, are gambling with their lives and making the treacherous sea crossing to Europe. No one should have to make that kind of choice.

An old Syrian proverb says, "Patience is the key to relief." But millions of Syrians like Khalida, Adnan and Um Anas need relief now. Patience is a luxury they, and we, cannot afford. ●

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