

Letters From the Field

A Collection of Short Essays on the Realities of Asylum in Jordan and the Ethics of Fieldwork by Josephine Ramseyer

As a member of the Displacement, Resettlement, and Global Mental Health Bass Connections team, last summer I spent six weeks researching the realities of asylum for Iraqi and Syrians living in Jordan. In addition to conducting life story interviews with the asylum seekers themselves, I familiarized myself with as many aspects of their day-to-day experience as I could (the NGOs and services at their disposal, the general landscape and culture of Jordan, and the relationship between asylum seekers and the local communities, to name a few) as a means to understand not only the unique circumstances of living in a country of reception like Jordan, but also my role as a field researcher looking in on one of the regions that is most affected by what is increasingly referred to as “the greatest human rights crisis of our time.” The following essays make up a series of reflections that I had while in the field about the realities of the crisis on the ground and the ethics of my being there to witness them in the first place.

I. Incapable of Moving Forward; Unable to Go Back

In the desert region of Azraq, a once-oasis squeezed dry by the government and home to 18,000 (registered) refugees, there is a girl who fled Syria without her high school diploma. The Jordanian government, taking its cue from the only documents she was able to bring, would have her enroll in a sixth-grade class; her intellect, experience, and eighteen years of age would have her entering college. Yasmeen* is one of the many victims of such staunch bureaucratic procedures: in a world where papers and stamps and signatures override personal circumstance—even when said circumstance is fleeing war or persecution—and a country crumbling under the burden of five (and increasingly, six) refugee populations, there is no room for exceptions within the educational system. Like so many refugees living in a country of asylum, Yasmeen finds her life at a standstill: incapable of moving forward in Jordan, unable to go back to Syria, she is trapped in displacement limbo, a state punctuated by the beep of an absent official’s answering machine, who is probably also waiting on a response on how to respond to her.

This is the plight of a young woman who has completed her secondary education; now imagine the situation for those who have not. The crisis in Syria has interrupted educations across the board, forcing kids out of school for months or even years, and inflicting psychological trauma that not only makes children unable to cope with new learning environments but also has them forget what they have already learned. Sixteen-year-olds are at the level of third-graders, and twelve-year-olds are no longer able to read. Some children have forgotten how to behave in a classroom; others have lost the ability to speak, and almost all of them are not afforded the opportunity to go to school in Jordan, which would need an estimated 75 more public schools in order to accommodate the Syrian population alone. Jordan is a country in need of assistance without the added pressure of being the Middle East’s biggest country of asylum: it is the third poorest

country in the world in regards to access to water, and yet circumstance and international obligation has it sharing this scarce and precious resource with its 1,000,630 (registered) Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian, Sudanese, Somali, and now Yemeni refugees. With the government struggling to provide the means to satisfy this basic need (it drained Azraq dry in the eighties in an attempt to supplement the lack of water), how could it possibly provide Syrian children with the resources they need when said need is both educational and psychosocial? This is but one example of the kind of aid impediments this population, the government, and NGOs are forced to face.

As a means to fill this gap, a catch-up school, run by a local organization originally designed to aid women in the community and sponsored by Mercy Corps, was created in Azraq with Syrian refugees in mind. Currently educating 52 refugee children in the hopes of one day enrolling them in Jordanian schools at a grade level suitable for their age, the school's mission is to create an environment that will allow the students to become comfortable in a classroom setting again, and to acquire the tools they need in order to succeed on a regular study track. However, Jordan has yet to recognize the efforts of the school in Azraq and refuses to accept any diploma it bestows upon its students, which means that even for students like Yasmeen who are up to grade level and have completed the necessary requirements to graduate (from the Azraq school or otherwise), there is no official acknowledgement whatsoever. The government treats her as if she has had no education past primary school, and she is left with a job at the catch-up school as her only alternative, teaching children in Azraq who, as of now, by the end of their education will find themselves in the same situation as her if they stay in Jordan. Even if she were able to go on to college, as a Syrian asylum-seeker she is only recognized as a refugee by UNHCR and not by the Jordanian government which truly cannot afford to provide the benefits that title allows to any more populations. So even with a viable degree, she would not be able to work in Jordan, which presents a host of entirely separate issues in and of itself for both her and the larger population in her same situation.

As far as I see it, the plight of organizations working to help Syrian refugees is this: no one has been able to agree upon a viable method for providing aid, as expected outcomes differ greatly from organization to organization. As such, resources are being spent in all different directions and with distinct end goals in mind. For example, while the IOM sees no end to the war and seeks to encourage resettlement, other organizations such as ARDD and initiatives such as the Azraq catch-up school are focusing their efforts on making asylum in Jordan livable and post-conflict life in Syria fruitful. These opposing views not only pull refugee aid in two separate directions, they also offer two completely different solutions for Jordan. Simplistically stated, the two come down to this: resettling the majority, thereby relieving stress from the country but dispersing a population that as of now has no desire to stray from its homeland, or keeping them all here in the hopes that Jordan will allow the Syrians refugee status and the rights it affords, that the war end soon, and that resources do not dry up before it does.

There are 3 million externally displaced Syrians, 3 million more still residing within Syria, and limited resources that are restricted even more by the split in aid initiatives to service them. Is it wrong to hold out hope for an end to the war? Is it right to give up on

Syria? Will Jordan have to sustain the population for much longer? Can it? When will the waiting game end? Like Yasmeen and her education, applicants and resettlement, Jordan and a return to normalcy, organizations are trapped in displacement limbo, incapable of moving forward without predicting the future, and unable to go back to how it once was. The question remains: what now? As ever, so does the answer: wait and see.

*The name has been changed to protect anonymity

II. Selfie Sticks at Petra

Walking through the red-rose ruins of Petra, an ancient city in the south of Jordan considered by many as one of the world's Seven Wonders, most of the people that I encountered fit into one of two categories: foreign tourist or native Bedouin, and everyone played their part perfectly. The combination of short-short-sporting, Nikon-toting tourists—a group from which we were by no means exempt as we pranced around with a selfie stick all day—and Keffiyeh- and kohl-wearing workers contributed to the constructed world of the tourist industry, which, like the entertainment business, runs on the consumption of a subtle mix between reality and performance. Much like how we planned our outfits with the intention of attaining the perfect traveler-chic to enhance our future profile pictures, the Bedouins also played into the mystique of Petra by renting donkey rides and offering to trade a hundred camels for tourists' hands in marriage.

At least, that is how I saw it at first: I was sure that we were all playing the same game. In my mind, the situation was this: as a tourist, I had come to Petra to see the ruins, but I had also come for the experience that being at the site would afford me, which is where the Bedouins came in. I suspected that they knew that I wanted the most “authentic traditional” experience I could get, and they probably knew that the experience I wanted had to fit my vision of the ruins and how life amongst them used to be—think of it like a checklist. Desert landscape? Check. Ancient rock constructs? Check. Woven rugs and camel rides and Jack Sparrow eyeliner? Check, check, check. They know what I want to buy, and as master merchandisers, they know how to sell it me. I assumed that this was something about which everyone was cognizant, them especially; as such, I went through the day only slightly uncomfortable with the role I had taken on. The tourism industry is just as much a part of the service sectors as everything else: some buy, some sell.

As I fulfilled one of my tourist's duties by riding a camel through the ancient city, I became rather friendly with the man who was leading us. I asked him where he lived and who his family was. He told me he lived in a cave a little bit north of the amphitheater, that his brothers and sisters and wife and children all worked around Petra too, selling traditional jewelry or cardamom, just as his parents had done, and their parents before that. He gestured around the ruins and proudly said: “this is my home, and I share it with everyone.” I asked him where he had learned to speak English so well. “Giving the tours,” he said. “I also speak French, Spanish, and German. It's what I need for business.” I asked him if this was specific to only him, and he said: “Some people around

here, they speak seven languages fluently, so they can give all the tours. Everyone in my community speaks at least three languages.”

I tried to picture a community of artisans and camel herders learning languages in the conditions he described for the sake of giving tours of their home: it was an idea I couldn't quite wrap my head around. The way he told it, the whole community seemed to be engaged in bolstering their tourism, learning upwards of seven languages and renting out their livestock for the benefit of vacationers. While I was sure that most of what they showed to me was a part of the act, it occurred to me that maybe what I was seeing was less of an act than I had originally thought. This isn't to say that maybe they actually are like the stereotypes they play into when tourists are around, but that perhaps tourism itself has become so embedded in their daily lives and legacy that now it is a part of their very culture. When I saw them around Petra dressed in “traditional” garb and selling old Roman coins, I imagined them going home at the end of the day, taking off their stage makeup, and shaking off the work day just like any actor would, going back to their “actual” lives (whatever that means) in the process. I imagined them having a whole other life, one that didn't involve the likes of me, and my consumption of their “faux” culture—one that was entirely untouched by tourists. However, after probing the issue even minimally, I realized that this notion might be idealized, too. Tourism makes up a large part of the community's livelihood, and in this respect was it mere wishful thinking on my part to believe that I, like so many tourists before me, had not contributed to the evolution of their culture, one they had shaped in order to meet the demand? Somehow this made me feel responsible, but for what? What does it matter that the culture at Petra is shaped around tourism? Isn't that just what happens to historical artifacts, the world's wonders?

III. Lifeline

Between the time we arrived at the Jordan Health Aid Society (JHAS) clinic in Amman at 10 am to the time we left at noon, clinic manager Aref Jaber's phone rang upwards of fifty times. We were sitting in his office, a simple yet spacious room filled with a desk and a notable amount of extra chairs lined up against the back wall, as he briefed us on the workings of the Madina clinic, our conversation regularly halted by receptionist-chased patients coming in to speak with him. He explained that there used to be two additional clinics in Amman for refugees, one through JHAS and one through CARITAS, but at the beginning of the year, for reasons unbeknownst to him, they closed. Since then, the influx of patients at Madina has tripled. On average, four hundred people per day come into the clinic seeking treatment, which only comprises two floors, with no more than six examination rooms and twenty-three caretakers. Every staff member and medical provider has had to increase his or her workday by at least two days, and UNHCR has set up an overnight hotline to accommodate all of the calls. As for the daytime calls and in-office requests, those are up to Jaber and his staff.

“All refugees ask the reception, ask doctors, ask nurses, ask clinic managers to make sure,” he said. He told us they seek him out when they are not given the answer for which

they were hoping, and look to him to skirt around policies and make allowances in order for them to receive aid from the clinic, particularly in regards to the “vulnerable” vs. “non-vulnerable” qualification. As the rapid increase of Syrian asylum seekers continues to add to the strain put on the Jordanian government and aid organizations alike, since September 2013, UNHCR has had to separate refugees into two distinct categories in order to determine who is the most in need of receiving healthcare from institutions that cater specifically to them, such as JHAS, based on an assessment of their living and financial situations. Initially, this was not such a drawback for those deemed “non-vulnerable” as healthcare was free for all Syrians in Jordan. However, as of November 2014 (a cut-off point we have heard much about since our arrival in Jordan), protocol for Syrian refugee healthcare has drastically changed, going from all inclusive to full-priced (refugees are not given any sort of insurance either) within a matter of what has been described to us as days.

“There was no fallback plan,” one man told us. “No plan B. One day Syrian refugees simply couldn’t receive free healthcare.”

This new law exacerbated the issue, not because JHAS services are free where governmental ones are not (according to Jaber, the prices are comparable), but because JHAS is not only able to provide faster care, since it targets a specific population it also has the knowledge and connections to other aid organizations that give the financial aid to refugees that allows them to seek out the care they need. Jordanian hospitals typically do not have the links to give out referrals to UNHCR or IMC or CARITAS for refugees who cannot pay for their healthcare, and refugees typically do not know to seek out these resources, or who is the appropriate person to call, as Jaber explained to us when he talked about the kinds of calls he receives. This is where the likes of JHAS are so important, and this is where the current healthcare policies—a service so vital and basic—act as a dropped lifeline. Like Jaber’s phone number, which is posted online and commonly shared amongst the refugee community but never answered, these services are specifically set up in order to aid refugees, yet in the current legal climate, many, specifically Syrians, cannot access them. Aid organizations are the institutional representation of hope for them, a supposed promise to refugees that they will get the help they need in their time of crisis; but the sheer volume of calls and requests and refugees themselves in Jordan makes benefitting all of them infeasible. What must it feel like to have those calls go unanswered? How could it be done otherwise?

When Jaber told us that the biggest challenge the clinic faced were the phones, I thought he was making a joke of the number of times our conversation had been interrupted by the incoming calls—I think I may have even laughed. But it was no joke; in fact, it was something he felt very strongly about: “if I answered every call, I’d never get anything done here,” he said. This is the paradox with which I struggle: despite the fact that the calls he receives are from the population he works to help, there is no way he could answer and run a clinic designed to help them at the same time. However, the fact still remains: those calls go unanswered, and the hope his number represents for refugees seeking healthcare, aid, or even just support is also abandoned.

IV. Lines

The first time we assisted Habaibi, a volunteer-based initiative that fosters community amongst refugee youth in Zadari village, project manager Abby told us to not be afraid to discipline the children. “Sometimes they just need to be shouted at,” she said, “especially the boys.” I have heard throughout my time here from friends we have met and even our Arabic teacher that parenting tends to be a bit harsher than it is in the U.S., and if it is anything like what I experienced with my own Mediterranean upbringing, I know the tougher methods come from a place of love. However, there was an instance during our time here when one of the Jordanian volunteers grabbed a ten-year-old boy by the biceps, picked him up, and slammed him repeatedly into the side of the bus, red-faced and screaming his admonishments at him. I was shocked by his display of what I can only describe as violence. While the child was undoubtedly in need of restraint, and while I later learned of the crime that prompted his punishment and understood the volunteer’s actions a little better, the fact remained that a near-thirty-year-old man unabashedly, brutally berated a child in my presence, and my natural instinct—call it maternal, if you will—was inciting me to stop it.

Yet I am not his mother, or any parental figure of any kind to him; in fact, in that circumstance, as in every other in Jordan, I was a researcher, a label that prescribes that I do the opposite of what my raw inclination was calling for me to do: observe, not intervene. I watched the man shake the sobbing boy and tried to rationalize my decision to stand by. My job is to be culturally sensitive and this, surely (maybe, hopefully), was just a cultural moment instead of a hostile one. You see, of what I have observed, fights break out all the time amongst these kids, but this boy had hit one of the girls, wherein lies the difference. Almost every aid organization with which we have met has spoken to the prevalence of gender-based violence within these communities, and has stressed the importance it places on rectifying this behavior. In that respect, the volunteer’s outburst was probably in response to a deeply seeded issue, perhaps even a behavioral pattern that he had seen not only in that boy but in the larger group of rowdy boys who I regularly see beating on each other, and who might periodically be hitting the girls, too.

Maybe the volunteer knew something about the boy’s family that I don’t; maybe hitting women is a common practice in his household, and he figured the best way to keep him from emulating forceful behaviors was through using force himself. Maybe he was trying to make an example of him to the other boys who engage in similar behaviors. Does that mean that I was right to not get involved? These are all assumptions after all, and as aware as I was of what I didn’t know, my level of comfort with the situation rested in the trust that I placed in the volunteer’s knowledge and intentions, of which I also knew nothing. Yet my trust in this violent stranger somehow amounted to enough to not intervene at all. How did that happen? Was it really my faith in him that kept me from protecting the child? Or was it my desire to be a “good researcher” that let me allow that scene to unfold as it did? Somewhere there must be a line between interfering with a cultural occurrence and enabling an injustice: had I crossed it?