



Syrian Opportunity to Help Those Suffering Abroad

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Accepting Syrian migrants in America and Europe has become an increasingly divisive political issue. But needy people can be helped overseas as well as at home.

While the Gulf States have refused to offer refuge to any fleeing Syrians, Syria's direct neighbors bear a huge burden, with Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey each hosting more than a million refugees. More than four million people have left Syria and even more have been displaced internally.

Last year I visited Zaartari Refugee Camp, located just a few miles from the Syrian border in Jordan. I was traveling with International Orthodox Christian Charities, which carries out an expansive ministry addressing the many needs of Syrians inside and outside of their country.

Zaartari, just a few miles from the Syrian border, opened in July 2012 and now contains around 80,000 people, making it Jordan's 4th largest "city." The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has overall authority to care of refugees, but the camp is managed by the Hashemite Charity Organization. A multitude of other governments and NGOs, such as the IOCC, my host, support Zaartari's operations.

Camp residents are dependent on the charity of others. Economic life is almost entirely controlled from outside. When there is less aid money, the "city" sputters. Zaartari went without electricity for nine months when UNHCR didn't have the money to pay the Jordanian government.

I visited a clinic which typically serves about 700 people daily. Samer Makahleh, with the Jordan Health Aid Society, coordinates health care programs. "To fill gaps we go to outside partners like IOCC," he explained. Two people came up to me during my brief visit seeking financial support for operations.

Refugees receive a stipend of roughly \$30 a month. Many also work for the camp, NGOS, or in private shops. Most surprising may be the diversity of private businesses, around 2500 in all, many of which line the main street, called the Champs-Elysees.

The UNHCR estimates that 60 percent of working age refugees are employed to some degree. Even 13 percent of children labor some, a number missing school as a result.

Helping with security was 22-year-old Abdul al-Jabbar, who said his family of nine came from the city of Daraa to the camp three years ago. Life is difficult, he said, “but at least we are alive. We must adapt.” One of his brothers works for a private business and another in their parents’ small retail shop.

Almost anything is available for a price. Shops sell food, cell phones, tools, household supplies, and clothes, including wedding dresses, which are available for rent. There are barbers and hair-dressers. Restaurants and cafes.

Residents can buy falafels and order pizzas. There’s even a travel agency, though few refugees are in a position to go far. I bought a few worry beads to supplement my supply.

Homes are a mix of tents and containers, which can be purchased by residents to gain a bit more protection from the extremes of hot and cold. Most refugees now have their own latrines and kitchens, instead of having to rely on communal facilities. There is little furniture, though cushions are popular.

The landscape is dusty, a bit out of Mad Max World, suggested journalist Mark Haddon of London’s Daily Mail. But there are spots of green. Two homes, across from each other, have a few plants growing outside.

Both families, from the Syrian city of Daraa, were farmers. They are determined to preserve a little memory of home, and use wastewater to keep the plants alive.

The future weighs heavily. Many refugees want to return to their homes, which may no longer exist. Others would like to try life outside of the camp in Jordan, but cannot go legally without financial sponsorship. Resettlement elsewhere grows less likely as political opposition to increased immigration rises.

Still, life goes on. One of al-Jabbar’s sisters is engaged. The present may be difficult, but who wants to wait for a future which may never come?

People in America and elsewhere in the West enjoy lives of comparative privilege. We should respond with compassion to those in need. Americans can give to organizations, such as IOCC, which help care for the human tsunami from Syria.

“Whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers of mine, you did for me,” said Jesus. (Matthew 25:40) Helping refugees in Zaartari would be a fine place to start.

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