

A Visit To LWF/WS Project in Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan 21.-23.october 2014

Travel report by WSC-member, medical student and musician Jenny Skumsnes Moe/Church of Norway



Object for traveling: Research

- 1) *Visiting and getting to know the WS-project led by Wejdan Jarrah on psychosocial support and peace building and involved staff*
- 2) *Connect with people who are interested in providing footage for a charity/donation-video promoting understanding and action in regards to the WS-project and the Syrian crisis*

Facts about the destination:

The refugee camp in Zaatari was opened in July 2012, and is run by joint administration between UNHCR and the Jordanian government. It's situated 15 km south of the Syrian border in the Zaatari village and is housing between 80-85.000 Syrian refugees, Sunni Muslims mostly from the Daraa region in Syria. The camp has been closed for new admissions, and a new camp, Azraq camp, has been set up in Zarqa to fill the need of more housing.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has accepted close to 620.000 Syrian refugees, the major housing sites being Amman governorate, and Mafraq governorate, including Zaatari Refugee Camp, the second largest.

The Syrian civil war is an armed conflict with roots in the wide spread demonstrations during the Arab spring protests in 2011. Met by a severe and violent response from the Assad-regime, the unrest developed into a civil war with what UN has called marked sectarian features, where the Alawite government forces fight alongside militias and other Shia groups, against largely Sunni-dominated rebel groups. The original organized rebel force was the Free Syrian Army in 2011, but this group has largely lost it's united momentum and has disintegrated into the war. The main umbrella for the Syrian opposition is now under the Syrian National Coalition, with the Islamic Front formed in 2013, the Al-Qaeda related Al-Nusra Front fighting since 2012 and other Syrian groups. In 2013 ISIL joined the fights from their on-going fights in northern Iraq, and they are now fighting against the regime, but also the other rebel groups in addition to fighting Turkish fighters, as ISIL is not viewed as fighting for the Syrian people, but for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Their extreme use of violence has also made Al-Qaeda denounce and cut their tie to the group, which originally was known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq. In addition, the Syrian civil war has seen a huge rise in the attraction of foreign fighters, joining on all sides in the conflict. The international response however, as seen in Libya and Iraq, has not yet come.

As of august 2014, 190.000 people have been killed in the conflict, according to the United Nations. Estimated up to 10.000 of these are children. The children and youth who have fled, more than 1,2 millions, suffers from the uprooting and lack of educational possibilities threatening their future. Religious minorities have also suffered heavily under the strengthened sectarian divisions in the fights both in Iraq and Syria, with a huge percentage of Christian Arabs having fled the region.

Preparations and practicalities

The practical arrangements for the visit was very well managed by the LWF-staff in Amman, from the accommodations at Hotel Geneva to arranging travel to and from the airport and the Zaatari refugee camp and arranging for admission into the camp. I benefited from their good organizational skills and hospitality throughout the stay, and I was very much impressed by their team spirit and positive working environment. The days in the Zaatari refugee camp was organized by Wejdan Jarrah, with interview opportunities, visiting workshops and information on the camp and their work for psychosocial health.



The last evening, I was invited to stay at the home of the project leader Mrs. Jarrah, close to the city of Irbid in the north east. I also benefited from the interest in this project by NIKON, who provided me with 2 compact HD cameras for the purpose of obtaining footage. An important part of my preparations consisted of reading up on the situation, and communicating with Danish director Søren Vestergaard Nielsen for input and advice on the filmic aspects of the project.

The visit

The journey was a short and intense 3 days visit, where the whole of the days were spent in Zaatari refugee camp. It was a large mental process to go from the mass media presentation of the Syrian conflict, presented to me at a safe distance in Norway, to the realities on the ground in the desert, only kilometres away from the war. Most people do not get this opportunity to enhance their comprehension of the conflict by visiting and talking to people directly, so this experience of transition was important for me to reflect upon as it will be useful in the making of an effective video.

THE ARRIVAL. On Tuesday morning the 21st of October I found myself, after just 2,5 hours of sleep, on my way to Zaatari Refugee Camp for the first time. At a distance, the camp shimmered like a large white lake in the desert, the UNCHR-tents reflecting the October sun. As we approached, the lines of people walking in and out of the camp were massive, Tuesdays being visiting days and many of the Syrians settled in the host communities were visiting friends and relatives in the camp. Encircled by fences and mounds, the camp stretched out divided into 12 districts and enclosed encampments for NGO's and camp management staff. We arrived at the LWF-encampment, and the office and workspaces set up for workshops and management.

THE WORK. At my first encounter with Wejdan Jarrah, I was briefed on the guidelines for the psychosocial support-projects, including the background for the name of the LWF-project, The Peace Oasis. The name was suggested early on by one of the participants, reflecting their view on what this project in it's nature is: a peaceful and energizing oasis in the desert, to relieve aggressive behaviour and promote understanding of emotions and learn how to best solve conflicts. I witnessed this early on, while observing a group of teenage boys talking about how their day had been and what emotions they went through. The work is based upon a discovered need in the camp to promote initiatives reducing violence, which was a significant problem in the camp early on. The work is further constructed on theories promoting the identification of good integration into society, livelihood possibilities and communicational skills as essential to reduce violence and promote constructive actions for a better future. The work takes the shape of a staged program, beginning with focus on 1) self esteem/respect and expression and recognition of emotions, anger management 2) empathy and conflict resolution, 3) peace building in the community. The work is led out through means of group discussions, drawings and creative expressions, questionnaires, vocational training (sewing, hair dresser, barber) and sports (football, taekwondo ++).

THE PEOPLE. I was early on introduced to members of the LWF staff in Zaatari. The implementers of the workshops and group activities are all led by Syrian people from the camp, themselves too refugees, chosen after two rounds of interviews. I was very much impressed by their leadership skills, energy and passion for their work, several of them expressing gratitude for the work opportunity this project has given them, for some to the extent of the work providing their life with a new sense of purpose, which since the uprooting from Syria had been missing, several of them being former students or active in their career already before being forced to flee from where they were constructing their future and homes. Their stories of the escape, what they could and couldn't bring, what they miss and what their hopes are for the future, all encircle the deep wish to return to Syria, continue studies and meet friends and families again.

FOOTAGE. I got introduced to Mohammad and Kheirat, to young implementers in the LWF-project. During my stay they borrowed cameras and filmed from their every day life in the camp. The footage was very promising, and strengthened this choice for obtaining footage to make a good, ethical and humane story from life as a refugee.

Results and onwards

In regards to the objectives for going, I got a good introduction and overview of the LWF-project and I met with people who are interested in providing footage, who already has filmed several scenes from their life in the camp. We will however need more footage, both "random" footage from life in camp and also

"footage on demand" to make a video with a strong and identifiable story. The strategy onwards will be to assemble all clips so far and make the outlines of a story board, in this way identifying what we need more of. NIKON has agreed to further camera rentals, and the further footage could be done by sending cameras by post to Wejdan Jarrah and communicate via e-mail/Skype. I would also be more than happy to go back to Zaatari if needed.

Afterthoughts

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to visit the Zaatari refugee camp and the work of Wejdan Jarrah, I am very proud to be a member of an organization that makes this work happen. Several NGOs run projects in this regard, but on a large scale this genre of work is little known to the average donor/church. Anger management and conflict solving is of outmost importance when it comes to rebuilding societies and preventing people inflicting violence and death upon others, and the LWF-project in Za'atari would benefit from higher visibility (for instance, it is not mentioned on the Wikipedia article on NGO's doing work in Zaatari Refugee Camp¹) and a stable funding allowing the expansion of the program to more districts in the camp.

The visit also outlined three other important subjects: refugee/immigration-politics in our respective countries and how we as citizens and organization have a responsibility to work for a better policy, allowing uprooted people the possibility to continue building their lives while waiting to return to their homeland or finding a new homeland, 2) the need to make visible what interreligious dialogue is already taking place and intensify this work, in order to a) reduce sectarianism, b) strengthen the theological arguments for non-violence and c) in cooperation with Islamic authorities and/or professors in Islam, analyse and de-mythify the "theological" foundations of the IS and respond to the fear of many people for this organization, and lastly 3) continue the support of Arab Christians who are fleeing the region.

When Jesus according to Luke 19, 41-42 wept while looking out over Jerusalem, due to the people's lack of ability to recognise what could have given them peace, we're still crying 2000 years later over a world society capable of so much, but still incapable of saving innocent lives from death in war and war traumas. We don't have the complete solution yet, but psychosocial support, anger management and conflict resolution is a corner stone, a compassionate world society that understands the need for livelihood opportunities and respect the human life is the foundation. As privileged world travellers it is our opportunity and responsibility to do what we can to increase that compassion and understanding. I hope and believe that this video project will contribute to that purpose.

"I used to have a dream, but it's been blown away by the winds of this place. My dream was to go to university and study pharmacy. It was on my mind and in my heart, but it's been reduced to ash."

Heba, 17, Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, from UNICEF article on Education Interrupted²



¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaatari_refugee_camp

² http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Education_Interrupted_Dec_2013.pdf