

Two years ago Syrian families began arriving at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. What started as a few tents has now grown into a city.

ANGELA NICKERSON and RICHARD BRYANT travelled there.

AFTER PERSECUTION – ZAATARI REFUGEE CAMP

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e are driving through the Jordanian desert. It is mid-morning, and the sun is blinding as it ricochets off the endless expanse of sand. We have travelled an hour and a half from our base in Amman.

As we travel further from the city, the number of stores and dwellings dwindles, until the sole signs of life are camels and their handlers by the side of the road. We draw closer to the gates, and people appear as if from nowhere. Vehicles line up to enter the camp, vendors hawk their wares from the side of the road, and children push through the throngs, imploring visitors for food and money. Stark wire fences lie ahead of us, dominated by a large white sign that welcomes us, in Arabic and English, to Zaatari Refugee Camp.

Zaatari is the second largest refugee camp in the world, home to a multitude of Syrians who have fled their home country. The swell in numbers in the past two years (from hundreds to over 144,000) has made it Jordan's fourth largest city.

It is located only 40 kilometres from Dara'a where the Syrian uprising began in 2011. Shortly after the uprising, refugees began to pour into Jordan, often crossing the border on foot, desperate to escape the persecution and violence in Syria.

At this time, Jordan was already host to nearly 30,000 Iraqi refugees. The tide of Syrian refugees compelled the UNHCR to construct the Zaatari refugee camp, which opened in July of 2012.



It is estimated, however, that three-quarters of the Syrian refugees in Jordan are still living in non-camp settings, predominantly in the north of Jordan. The ongoing influx of Syrian refugees is threatening to overwhelm the country's resources, and presents a formidable challenge to the provision of shelter, food, and safety to these vulnerable individuals.

After entering the camp, we travel on foot down the main thoroughfare, which is on the western side of Zaatari. This bitumen road is lined with a ramshackle collection of shelters and stalls, peddling everything from rotisserie chickens to hardware to clothing.

There is even a rumour that this street (known to the Syrians and the aid workers as the Champs-Élysées) hosts a store that deals solely in wedding dresses. People gather in small groups, purchasing food, trading goods, and catching up on the day's events. There is a sense of community here, punctuated by "Free Syria" flags that appear at regular intervals along the boulevard.

Dwellings can be seen down each of the laneways that extend like spokes out from the main road. These are shanty buildings made from fibro board and corrugated iron. We are told that this used to be a tent city, but after a brutally cold winter in which 30 children perished, buildings have been erected to provide shelter from Jordan's hostile winter.

Life in Jordan is difficult for Syrian refugees, while stories of death, loss, torture and rape in Syria abound. The refugees' own experiences shadow

Syrian refugees reflected in the window of a shop on the main street through camp. April 3, 2014. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi.

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their days. In Jordan, people struggle to find shelter for their families, adequate food, laundry and bathing facilities.

The UNHRC, NGOs and the Jordanian government are working around the clock to assist the refugees – but there are simply not enough resources to go around. Many Syrians yearn for home, for their friends and loved ones, for comfort and safety. The stress of the resettlement environment is unrelenting.

Families live in close quarters. Tensions rise. One mental health worker tells us that the most commonly reported difficulty is not, as one might expect, symptoms of traumatic stress or depression; but rather conflicts with others in the camp – both within and beyond their own families.

The pressure of stretching scarce resources causes tempers to fray, and fights break out. It is also not a safe place. Stories of physical and sexual abuse reveal a setting in which there is no formal law and order, and gangs have compounded the fear felt by many who have fled the civil war.

The refugees seek out information about the state of events in Syria. There are endless debates about the prospect of returning home. However, right now there is no possibility of reprieve.

The experience of the Syrian refugees in Jordan is mirrored by research that has been conducted by academics around the world. These studies have considered the impact of trauma in the home country, and the post-migration environment on refugee mental health. As expected, research has consistently found that exposure to traumatic events like witnessing the death of a loved one, rape, or torture, are strong predictors of mental health problems like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and suicidality.

There is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that the post-migration environment is critical to refugee mental health. In western resettlement countries, stressors like unemployment, inability to speak the language of the host country, discrimination, and difficulties with attaining refugee status are strongly associated with symptoms of PTSD and depression.

In a survey of Tamil asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants, researchers from the University of New South Wales found that post-migration living difficulties impacted on mental health to a similar extent as pre-migration trauma.

In a study we conducted with Iraqi refugees, we found that fears for family members remaining in Iraq contributed strongly to mental health problems, even after controlling for the effects of trauma experiences and other resettlement stressors.

Taken together, these findings tell us what many Syrian refugees already know – that the pain does not stop when a refugee is safe from persecution. Even in politically stable western countries, refugees and asylum seekers encounter stressors that have a debilitating effect on their mental health. This is especially pertinent in the current international climate, where policies of deterrence in relation to seeking asylum are the norm.

Research conducted at the University of New South Wales, for example, has highlighted the devastating psychological impact of prolonged immigration detention on refugee mental health. Our research has also demonstrated that the negative effects of temporary visas on psychological wellbeing are mediated by living difficulties in the post-migration environment.



Given what we know about the mental health effects of stressors in relatively safe western resettlement countries, it is difficult to comprehend the potential impact on the psychological wellbeing of these refugees of life in a refugee camp – or worse, remaining in the country of origin.

But in Zaatari, along these dirt laneways, in amongst the crowded shelters, underneath the wire fences, there are glimmers of hope. These can be seen in the faces of the refugees who volunteer at the health clinics on a daily basis; in the women who come together in informal support groups; in the children who play in the grimy alleyways. These remarkable signs of resilience are a testament to the strength and indestructible nature of the Syrian people. They speak to their determination to move forward, to build a new life, to overcome a recent history of violence and terror. And these signs of resilience are everywhere, once you know where to look.

As we leave Zaatari behind, the camp-city stretching out behind us in the Jordanian desert sunset, the words of one Syrian torture survivor ring in our ears. He said, “If I do not laugh, if I do not smile, I will die from sorrow.”

These Syrian refugees have experienced boundless sorrow. We must now provide them with a safe environment in which their psychological and physical wounds can heal. R

Syrian boys swim in a water reservoir on the edge of the Zaatari refugee camp. April 6, 2014. PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/Oculi.

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