



OUT OF THE ASHES

WHAT KEEPS PEOPLE *going when their LIVES have been SHATTERED and displaced by war?* PHOTOGRAPHER *Toufic Beyhum* found *RETAIL THERAPY* is making all the difference for the *SYRIAN residents of the ZA'ATARI refugee camp.*

WORDS ELISSA WEBSTER PHOTOGRAPHY TOUFIC BEYHUM

The shopfronts tussle for attention with beautifully painted signs while clusters of shoppers punctuate the grey street with bursts of colour. But there, the parallels between the Za'atari “Champs-Elysées” and its Parisian namesake fade out. The walls of the barber shop are made from recycled UNHCR rations bags and the double layer of mesh fencing offers a steely backdrop. Donkeys with carts and kids with wheelbarrows weave through the pedestrians, carrying people’s shopping home. And there’s the dust. Always present, it’s a constant, gritty reminder of the ashes that the 85,000 or so Syrian residents of Za’atari refugee camp are trying to rise from.

Za’atari is now two years old and a year ago was the fourth-largest city in Jordan, but no one living there really wants to. Universally, says writer Nadim Dimechkie, Za’atari’s residents want to return to the homes, families, trades, professions and possessions they left behind when war combusted in Syria. But in the meantime, they must make-do with what they have left – and that lies within.

In Za’atari, the resilience and resourcefulness needed to endure the circumstances – psychologically as well as physically – has taken the expression of a thriving retail sector, the explosive birth of which saw more than 2500 stores open across the camp within its first 18 months, including 700 shops along one premium stretch nicknamed the Champs-Elysées by French aid workers. It’s a retail phenomenon that the UNHCR’s Andreas Needham acknowledges is “impressive compared with other refugee camps” and that Nadim puts down to the deeply ingrained entrepreneurial spirit of the

Syrians, combined with the opportunities afforded by the camp – provision of the basics like blankets, shelter and food vouchers; electricity more reliable than in some of their villages; relative law and order that was notably absent at home; a captive market marooned about an hour’s drive away from the nearest neighbouring city. And perhaps most importantly, pride.

“Pride keeps the streets tidy and the wedding dresses moving,” writes Nadim. “Pride keeps the homes orderly, the teenaged boys groomed and fragrant, the barber shops busy. Pride keeps the shoe salesman in business.”

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It’s this story of dignity, the preservation of family trading traditions and the carving out of new opportunities that Toufic Beyhum explores in his photography series, ‘Za’atari Champs-Elysées’. It’s a story largely untold in the more common refugee camp images of food queues and aid trucks.>



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But as writer Pete Brook muses in response to Toufic's series, more than just food and shelter, "Survival has as much to do with forging one's own spaces, purpose, pride and as a result, psychological health."

The theme of displacement and survival is a personal one for Toufic. Born in Beirut in 1974, he and his family fled from Lebanon to London when he was a child. First picking up a camera at age 15, Toufic was hooked immediately and chartered a path to art college to learn the craft of visualisation. And learn it he did. His studies launched Toufic on a wide-ranging

career as an art director for multinational advertising agencies that has seen him based in New York, Dubai, London and Berlin over the years. Yet photography remains his first love, and so was the logical medium of choice when the trauma he saw in Syria demanded his response.

Toufic says the self-funded project, carried out in partnership with Nadim, whose words help to fully unpack their findings, was eye-opening.

"I have never been inside a refugee camp so I had no idea what to expect. But the design of the camp is the same as a small city or a town; you have the residential areas and you have a high street with all the shops and the occasional side streets. Every type of shop you can think of is there: butchers, restaurants, bakers, barber shops, fashion shops, shoe shops, perfume shops, mobile phone shops, currency exchange, gaming shops, wedding dress shops, supermarkets..."

"What the Syrians have made in this camp is phenomenal. Their entrepreneurial instincts kicked in and they saw an opportunity and just got on with it."

But in a refugee's world, nothing is simple. Even the success of these businesses is bittersweet.

"Syrians don't like to sit around doing nothing," says Toufic.

"They have been trained from a very young age to work hard, so for them it keeps them busy in the camp, gives them a sense of purpose. But at the same time, it might depress them to see all these shops and businesses popping up because they're

thinking this might be for good. And they don't want to stay there for good; their dream is to go back to Syria as soon as possible."

Apart from the existential implications of the retail boom, some very tangible challenges have to be met by Za'atari entrepreneurs and their customers.

First there is the issue of sourcing and transporting stock: while refugees are allowed to move freely in and out of the camp's groups, the logistics of procuring stock from Amman, an hour's car journey away, is difficult without the usual distribution channels.

Pre-war connections with Jordanian business partners help, and some of these are responsible for the large supermarkets now operating from the centre of the camp – additions that UN officials are quick to point out also mean a sizeable injection to the Jordanian economy.

Second, there is the question of how customers can acquire the disposable income necessary to purchase the wares.

While some may have arrived with money, ongoing conflict back home and three years of living in the camp takes a toll on family savings. The UNHCR steps into the void to some degree by providing food vouchers to use at the supermarket and a small monthly stipend of about US\$140 per family. But ingenuity fills in the income gaps – people sell the tents, blankets and even caravans they have received from the NGOs supporting the camp, and services unique to the rigours of camp life are conceived and delivered for a fee.

For example, take the one-time welders who have created a new trade by fusing together unconventional combinations of metal scraps to form custom-made contraptions, like a trolley designed to shift homes made of shipping containers.

Third, there is the need to manage the risks and costs of criminality, which characterised the parts of Syria that many

of the refugees fled and have survived the war, albeit in a lesser form, to follow its fellow survivors to the camp. There is talk of sexual assaults and gender-based violence in some parts, and of the self-appointed "street leaders" who are despised by other refugees for a variety of exploitations ranging from aid hogging to nepotism and extortion. These criminal elements represent an additional hazard to Za'atari entrepreneurs.

"Some shops have to pay protection money to certain gangs within the camp," says Toufic.

"And there are prime locations in the camp – you can't get those for free."

And yet, the Za'atari Champs-Élysées is busy all-day long, buzzing with traders and shoppers. About 65 per cent of Za'atari's residents are employed, 75 per cent are connected (illegally) to the electricity grid and 70 per cent have private toilets, many of which they have constructed themselves. Like it or not, life in Za'atari is going on.

The "mayor of Za'atari", UNHCR's Senior Field Coordinator Kilian Kleinschmidt, reflects the prosaic approach of the residents.

"The Syrians themselves have understood that unfortunately they will have to stay a little longer," he says. "So have we. That means changing the way that we look at a crisis. It's been quite dramatic." ■

