

# Refugee tent camp for Syrians grows into a busy Jordanian city

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A Syrian refugee boy plays with a tire at the Zaatari refugee camp in Mafraq, Jordan, July 28, 2015. AP/Raad Adayleh

**ZAATARI REFUGEE CAMP, Jordan** — From a town of tents, the Mideast's largest camp for Syrian civil war refugees has grown into a bustling city.

What was empty desert just three years ago, the camp now has plans for water and sewage systems and a \$20 million solar power plant. It even has ATM machines for refugees to get their aid payments.

But behind the plans is a cold reality for the 81,000 exiles living in the Zaatari Refugee Camp. Now in its fifth year, the war between the Syrian government and rebels will not be over anytime soon.

Some in the camp deal with that reality by making the best of life in exile.

## **Making The Best Of It Isn't Easy**

A Zaatari high school senior, for instance, studied hard in cramped quarters to win a university scholarship. A former farmer planted a garden because he was tired of looking at the desert.

Dozens of others leave every week to go back to Syria, saying it is better to risk death than live in Zaatari. Jobs are few, one-third of children do not attend school and thousands of young adults lack the chance to learn a trade.

"As time passes, yes, we can deal with the infrastructure," camp boss Hovig Etyemezian said. However, Etyemezian said he is "a long way from being confident" that enough is being done to save this generation of refugees.

Zaatari, which began on July 28, 2012, is now the ninth-biggest city in Jordan. Today, the tiny Jordanian kingdom hosts 629,000 Syrian refugees, out of a regional total of more than 4 million. More than 100,000 live in camps in Jordan, including 20,000 in the newer Azraq refugee camp, while the rest struggle to survive in cities with cash and food from the United Nations.

International agencies such as the United Nations had to reduce aid amid severe money shortages and additional cuts were announced July 31. Refugees who live in cities could soon face the hard choice of moving into a camp where life is cheaper — only Azraq is taking newcomers — or returning to Syria.

### **Not An Anniversary To Celebrate**

On Zaatari's anniversary, the transformation from tent camp to permanent city symbolizes the failure of the world to find an end to Syria's war. But some say it is also a reminder that the shift from emergency aid to long-term solutions, such as setting up a permanent water network, should have come much sooner.

"We simply wasted too much money because we didn't think long-term," former Zaatari boss Kilian Kleinschmidt said.

In Zaatari, one money saver, the solar power plant, will not be ready before the end of 2016. The electricity cuts are a usual subject of camp conversation, along with the question of whether to stay or go back to Syria.

The number of returnees has dropped to about 30 a day. It is one-fourth of what it was before the outbreak of major fighting several months ago in Syria's southern Deraa province, where many Zaatari residents are from.

### **"Education Is The Way"**

On July 29, Emad Issawi, his wife Nihad and their three young children stood along the camp's perimeter road with a pile of bags, waiting to catch a bus to the Syrian border. Those who leave are rarely allowed back.

Nihad her face covered by a black veil, said she reluctantly gave in to her husband's wishes to go back. "I'm scared," she said.

Across the street, Mohammed Hariri said he is returning to Deraa after one of his daughters assured him their village is relatively safe.

Others try to make the most of life in exile.

Jumma al-Sheik planted corn, tomatoes, mint and pink althea flowers, creating a popular gathering spot for relatives to drink sweet tea and chat.

Al-Sheik and family members fled a Damascus suburb after chemical attacks by the Syrian government there two years ago, and fighting destroyed their homes.

Al-Sheik, who farmed five acres of vegetables back home, said the garden "makes everything a little better."

Abdel Mutalleb Hariri enrolled his six children in camp schools immediately after they arrived in January 2013. Unable to work as a veterinarian, he now sells clothes while his wife, Fatmeh, teaches English in grade school.

Their oldest, 19-year-old Alaa, won a scholarship and finished her first year at nearby Al al-Bayt University.

"Education is the way, especially if you live in a camp," said Alaa, one of just a few in her age group to finish high school. Most drop out, some because they cannot afford a university.

## **Camp Doors Open, Camp Doors Close**

The camp has opened some new possibilities.

For hundreds of girls, life in Zaatari has meant a chance to play soccer. On a recent afternoon, about two dozen girls in headscarves practiced on an enclosed dirt pitch under the watch of coach Nour al-Dhaher, who is pregnant.

Although al-Dhaher initially enrolled in a coaching course to support her family, now she says loves watching her players transform from bashful to outgoing.

"Shoot! Shoot!" al-Dhaher yelled from the bench, cradling another coach's baby.

For others in the camp, doors are closing.

There has been a rise in early marriages, and some families marry off girls in their mid-teens, often so they do not have to support them.

"Here you have to get married young because the situation is difficult," said Sabrine al-Masaad, who runs a bridal shop. One of her recent brides was just 14 years old.

All the while, a new generation of Syrians is being born far from home.

Maan Turkman, 31, gave birth in her shelter recently, because the ambulance was late. Hours later, twins Mohammed and Ahmed lay asleep in a camp clinic's bassinets, swaddled in blankets.

Asked for her hope for them, she said, "I wish them a bright future in Syria."