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# The Difficulties of Filming Syrian Refugee Populations Living in Jordan: Obstacles to Objectivity and Accuracy in Reporting

Thaddeus E. DeCaprio

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THE DIFFICULTIES OF FILMING SYRIAN REFUGEE POPULATIONS LIVING IN  
JORDAN: OBSTACLES TO OBJECTIVITY AND ACCURACY IN REPORTING

by

THADDEUS ELIAS DE CAPRIO

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of

New York

2019

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies  
in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts,

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## ABSTRACT

The Difficulties of Filming Syrian Refugee Populations Living in Jordan:  
Obstacles to Objectivity and Accuracy in Reporting

by

Thaddeus Elias De Caprio

Advisor: Dr. Kristina Richardson

This project seeks to explain and address the challenges inherent in filming and documenting Syrian refugee populations in Jordan. This project will take the form of a narrative research paper in conjunction with a video component comprised of the first-hand accounts of several refugees who consented to sharing their stories on camera. I went, along with my brother Louis (a filmmaker), to Jordan to document firsthand the stories of Syrian refugees in their own words. We were invited to film for the Women ASPIRE project of an organization called ASPIRE (Advancing Solutions in Policy, Implementation, Research, and Engagement for Refugees), a Columbia University based organization with which I have formerly worked, interned, volunteered, and traveled. I draw upon contemporary literature on the topic of the refugee crisis with a focus on the impact it has had on women. I make reference to personally taken footage of several Syrian refugee men and women interviewees living in various living arrangements in Jordan. I elucidate the many challenges and obstacles to accurate, objective reporting of the current plight of Syrian refugees living in Jordan.

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## **I. Introduction**

The Syrian Civil War, now in its eighth year, has displaced nearly half of Syria's prewar population of 22 million people. The United Nations estimates that over six million Syrians are internally displaced within the country and five million Syrians have fled their homeland for neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (UNHCR, Operational Portal, 2018). While much media attention has focused on those refugees who have settled in refugee camps in neighboring countries, the vast majority of Syrian refugees are living outside official camps. In Jordan, it is estimated that only twenty percent of Syrian refugees are living in host government and/or UNHCR sponsored camps such as Zaatari and Azraq, the two largest refugee camps in Jordan. Eighty percent of Syrian refugees in Jordan are living outside of these camps; instead residing in various different living arrangements within the urban centers like Amman (UNHCR, Operational Portal, 2018).

While there is much existing information on those refugees who are registered in camps, relatively little has been done in the way of research and reporting on the overwhelming majority of refugees who have been dubbed by some as an "invisible population" (After Spring, 2016). I have always been curious about the experiences of these refugees who, for the most part, are off the radar of the international media in its reporting on the Syrian refugee crisis. The ASPIRE research project involving them provided me the opportunity to learn more, first hand, about this vast and largely invisible population. I contacted my brother, Louis, about the possibility of conducting a series of filmed interviews for the purposes of documenting some of the experiences of this largely invisible population firsthand. He agreed and before long we began the preproduction process for two film projects: one would be a promotional fundraising video

for the ASPIRE organization, and the other would be intended for a broader audience with the aim of raising awareness about those Syrian refugees living outside camps in Jordan. For the purposes of this paper, and at the request of the individuals interviewed throughout the course of our film shoot, I have changed the names of certain individuals we filmed.

### **Ia. Defining *Obstacle***

For the purposes of this paper, I define the term *obstacle* as any difficulty in the way of ascertaining objectivity. What I mean by this, in regards to what I call the *political* and *social* obstacles, is anything which can make it more difficult to determine if the subject is expressing themselves in a free and open way when speaking about their experiences. The very idea of simply questioning the validity of the testimonies of certain individuals in any way at all is a contentious subject, but it is one worth further exploration. Our goal, as is the goal of most documentarian filmmakers, is to provide the most objective understanding of the situation of our subjects as possible. This goal, simple as it seems, is anything but. There are, as with all work which is documentary in nature, various obstacles inherent in painting a fully objective picture. I have attempted to categorize such difficulties, throughout this paper, as belonging to one of three main subcategories in nature: *Political*, *Social*, and *Physical*.

### **Ib. *Political***

In most cases of obstacles political in nature, the tone of a certain individuals' statements is determined by their desire, or lack thereof, of returning to Syria. The international community is reducing its commitment to assisting the host nations of Syrian refugees at a pivotal time. In 2018, as the Syrian government emerges as the victor of the bloody, eight-year war, host countries such as Jordan are closing their borders and disincentivizing immigration across their borders. Consequently, vulnerable individuals are essentially being given the option of remaining

outside Syria with no educational or employment opportunities, or alternatively, returning to Syria and being subject to the Syrian government's discretion. This, of course, has led to additional barriers in the way of objective reporting. Syrians who either desire to someday return, or are being forced to return to Syria (which is now mostly under government control), are increasingly cautious in criticizing the Syrian government while being filmed, or even when talking on the phone to one another. Individuals also, in many cases, fear criticizing the Jordanian government as well due to fear of deportation. Human Rights Watch reports that it is estimated that the Jordanian government has been forcibly deporting an average of 400 Syrian refugees per month since 2017 (Frelick and Zayadin, 2017). The fear of being sent back to a hostile environment is real and ever-present in the minds of refugees and a sense of paranoia regarding surveillance, either by the Syrian or Jordanian governments, has swept through refugee communities.

### ***Ic. Social***

In most cases regarding what I call the social obstacles, is the question of gender. For the many Syrians who choose to stay in Jordan indefinitely, they are in need of additional assistance and women in particular are most vulnerable. The plight of refugee women ranges from sexual violence and domestic abuse to lack of employment due to limited access to educational resources. Many women are now finding themselves in a position which requires them to work and many are even the heads of their households. For other women, their husbands or sons (if they are alive and/or living in the same home) are pressed to work twice as hard or find semi-legal or completely illegal employment. I argue later on that many of the social pressures placed on refugee women need not be, and this can change. Improvement in the lives of women means improvement for the entire household. Through coming to see the potential for change afforded

by participation in women-focused research initiatives such as the ASPIRE study, many husbands may change their views in regards to limiting their wives' social participation. Husbands begin to see how allowing their wives to openly disclose matters related to their sexual health, leads to positive modifications to the living situation of the entire family. Other social challenges Syrian refugees encounter are difficulty in obtaining work permits, accommodation/housing, and general acceptance by Jordanian society. These challenges are harder to address.

#### ***Id. Physical***

By physical obstacles, I mean issues of access. We needed permits in order to film. We experienced some difficulty in both reaching out to people to talk to as well as in physically finding locations themselves.

#### **Ie. Other Obstacles**

We also encountered other obstacles such as issues of trust and trauma. Rightfully so, many people we interviewed were suspicious of our intentions as a pair of Americans with a camera. Many of these people had been through unthinkable trauma. In addition, there were of course the personal difficulties such as our own emotional responses towards the circumstances of the people we interviewed. There is also the issue of the language barrier; we were not raised speaking much colloquial Arabic at home, and even with some formal education in the Arabic language, we are far from fluency.

## **II. Background and Context**

In accompaniment to my writing, I provide a video component alongside this paper intended to highlight some of the individuals mentioned in writing. I went with my brother

Louis, a filmmaker, to Jordan to film the efforts being made at Columbia's Global Center in Amman. From this footage, we created a video for the purpose of raising funding for Women ASPIRE. In addition, we decided to take footage directly of refugees living outside refugee camps in Jordan intended for a documentary film, in conjunction with UNICEF, intended for a broader audience, on the plight of these refugees. Among the stories captured on video that I include are that of a computer engineer and his wife and daughter. The husband was tortured by the Assad regime in a Syrian prison, his leg seriously wounded to the point where he developed a life-threatening condition. His wife helped carry him over the border to Jordan. Another story is that of a woman whose husband died in Syria. She moved with the rest of her family to Baqa'a, originally a Palestinian refugee camp which now hosts a sizeable number of Syrian refugees as well. She cooks meals and sells them to the families inside and outside the camp as a source of income. A third story is of a man whose three children suffered from nerve-damage and exhibited common signs of having been the victims of a chemical weapons attack. One of them had severely impaired vision and one of them was completely blind. It is possible that, rather than cast blame on the Syrian regime for its use of chemical weapons, the man insisted that his children had simply been born that way and wanted to avoid the discussion. He then began asking our film crew if the video would be shown in Syria or would be on YouTube before he requested we stop the interview.

The majority of interview requests we made were rejected. All individuals who agreed to be interviewed and/ or filmed were given release forms to sign. Almost all of those who agreed to appear before the camera requested their names not be used in relation to our project in anyway whatsoever. Some requested to have their faces blurred and/or voices digitally altered.

For these reasons, and in the name of ethically responsible reporting, I will not be including their real names anywhere in my written or video components of this thesis.

Louis and I landed in Amman on the eighteenth of September 2018 to conduct interviews with Syrian refugees residing in Jordan, as well as research assistants working with specifically Syrian refugee women. We would be staying in a hotel in downtown Amman until the end of the month. Some of the refugees we interviewed lived in camps while others lived in apartment complexes or informal living arrangements throughout cities such as Amman or Mafraq. Our purpose for obtaining such footage was two-fold: the footage taken of the refugees would be used for a documentary film in conjunction with UNICEF, and the footage of the research assistants would be for the creation of a fundraising video on behalf of a Columbia University based research initiative called ASPIRE. I had done previous work for the ASPIRE organization in 2017 as an intern tasked with the job of translating a survey intended for research purposes from English to Arabic and then uploading the translated survey questions into a tablet-accessible app using the computer software Qualtrics. The survey questions varied in topic, ranging from reproductive and mental health to issues of domestic abuse and financial stability. The survey was intended to be administered to Syrian refugee women in health clinic waiting rooms across Jordan. I had travelled to Jordan for the first time during the Summer of 2017 at the invitation of the organization in order to provide instruction on tablet usage and protocol to the team of ASPIRE research assistants working at Columbia University's Global Center in Amman.

Relative to its small population, Jordan has received a significant number of Syrian refugees. These refugees require physical and mental health, educational, legal and social services to facilitate their resettlement and their eventual integration into their host countries, which poses a challenge for healthcare providers as well. Moreover, there is a growing need to

increase reproductive health services for the influx of Syrian refugee women of childbearing age. Factors such as early marriage, sexual and gender-based violence, mental health needs, coupled with challenges such as availability and quality of services, and cultural and stigma related barriers to accessing services all play a role in establishing need and understanding barriers to availing themselves of reproductive health services.

The ASPIRE study examines the mental and physical health needs of female Syrian refugees living outside of camps in Jordan, as well as examining barriers to accessing healthcare. The study involves a cross-sectional survey distributed to hundreds of female refugees living in urban settings in Jordan to address the broader population of refugee women living in Jordan, the majority of which are living outside of camps. Findings from this study will be used to develop a policy brief to be disseminated with organizations in Amman. They will also be used to develop a pilot intervention to address the needs of Syrian refugee women (Women ASPIRE).

This time around, in the fall of 2018, I found myself involved even more directly with the effort of refugee response. I had introduced Louis to the ASPIRE organization in order to consider the possibility of shooting a film in Jordan to attract much needed donors and bring awareness to the efforts being made by ASPIRE in Jordan. In addition to the fundraising video we were tasked with filming for ASPIRE, Louis and I decided we could use the opportunity to create a secondary project as well; one which would highlight the difficult circumstances of Syrian refugees themselves and humanize them for a broader audience.

My professional background, unlike Louis, was not in film and I therefore found myself having to learn lots of technical jargon and procedure on the fly. We travelled around to various locations in the northern part of Jordan collecting stories from Syrian refugees as well as Jordanian health professionals addressing the mental and physical health needs of Syrian refugee

women. We interviewed roughly two dozen Syrian men, women, and children along with five Jordanian doctors and medical students employed by the ASPIRE organization as data collectors and research assistants. In addition to the research assistants, we also secured a filmed interview with Dr. Maysa Khadra, one of Jordan's most renowned obstetricians who holds the title of 'Principal Investigator' of the ASPIRE research team in Jordan.

Louis and I each brought an extra piece of checked luggage with us containing cameras, lights, and other film equipment. We had obtained an official permit of authorization to film in the Kingdom of Jordan from the University of Jordan which works in conjunction with Columbia University. The usefulness of the permit was made abundantly apparent upon arriving at security and customs in Queen Alia International Airport in Amman. Airport security questioned us repeatedly about our authorization regarding the large amount of film equipment we were travelling with. After a lengthy phone call concerning our permit, the security guards gave us the green light and we were allowed to pass through to the airport exit where our driver was waiting for us. Louis and I had secured in advance two local Jordanian fixers based in Amman who we met up with over dinner in a hip, new restaurant shortly after our arrival. Both were women; a stipulation Louis and I intentionally requested in our search for local fixers. We wanted to have Arabic-speakers on board who could relate particularly to female interviewees, make them feel comfortable sharing details or emotions that they might not as readily share with a male interviewer. We coordinated with them to set up interviews with the stated purpose of research for an American university interested in helping address the needs of Syrian refugees living in Jordan. Our two female fixers, Hawa and Rashida, had already lined up a number of interviews for our project. They had called in advance several different connections with ties to various refugee living arrangements throughout the greater Amman area. Our fixers would also prove to

be effective translators and interlocutors for us, as we were not fluent in Arabic and were relatively unacquainted with many customs and etiquette of the more religiously conservative Muslim Syrians we would encounter. My role would be to share the interview questions with the fixers as well as set up lights, tripods, microphones, and any other equipment necessary for the purpose of filming. Louis was responsible for the filming itself.

### **III. Methodology**

Our first set of interviews took place the day after we arrived in Amman. We drove along with our fixers to a stretch of farmland just thirty minutes north of Amman in Mafraq, where there was an informal refugee camp of about 200 Syrians. The camp essentially served as a means of housing for refugees who had been hired by a philanthropic Jordanian farmer determined to help Syrians find work in Jordan. Our fixers had arranged with the head coordinator of the camp to meet with two families willing to talk to us about their experience as Syrian refugees living in Jordan. The first man we talked to changed his mind about appearing on camera and preferred to just speak with us. His wife brewed us some strong black tea with mint as we waited to begin the interview. His family, like many other Syrian families who fled to Jordan, had come from Aleppo, Syria to Jordan in 2013. My brother and I, through our limited knowledge of Arabic and our translator, bonded with the man over our shared connection to Aleppo, the city from which my maternal family hails. After hearing some of his stories, we moved on to the next tent which housed a family of five that agreed to be filmed. They signed our release forms and made us some strong Turkish coffee. It became quite apparent early on during our stay in Jordan that our project would be a much caffeinated one. The husband and wife both gave their testimonies in front of the camera, but preferred not to have their three daughters appear on camera. Before leaving the farm in Mafraq, the husband recited to us a brief

poem which he hoped would reach the ears and hearts of anyone who would see the footage in the future.

On our way out of the farm, Hawa received a call from one of her connections informing us that three families interested in sharing their stories wanted to cancel the interviews we had lined up for later that day. Hawa assured them we wouldn't be a burden, but they insisted that we come back another day. We were disappointed; the day had not gone as planned. Out of a total of five possible interviews, we had only obtained one on film. The representative of the three families that cancelled never called back to set up another day to shoot. Throughout the course of our time in Jordan, we would come to realize that this would often be the case for many other interviews on our schedule. This unpredictability in regards to being able to physically access some of our interview subjects would be a recurring theme during our project and represents one of the three main obstacles in the way of our documentation of Syrian refugees in Jordan I discuss in this paper: the issue of *access*.

We returned to Mafraq two days later. This time about an hour's drive north of Amman. We had interviews lined up for a family living in an apartment building located in the general city infrastructure. This family would prove to be one of the most illuminating in terms of the challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Jordan on a daily basis. We met with Waseem around noon. He invited us into the apartment he shared with his wife, three daughters, and two sons. I sat, along with Louis, Hawa, and Rashida, on his cushioned living room floor while his wife prepared cardamom flavored coffee for us. Waseem had just returned from his morning basketball coaching responsibilities; a side gig of sorts in which he had been involved for the last couple years. The basketball club comprised of disabled Syrian and Jordanian children who played basketball with wheelchairs. Waseem, who had only one leg and wore a prosthetic leg on

the other, was a role model of sorts for the boys he coached. He had over his house two men at the time of our arrival, both of whom were fathers of Syrian refugee children who played on the team he coached. The men had heard about the presence of a film crew in Waseem's home after the morning basketball practice and were interested to see for themselves. They looked at our four-person crew curiously but were warm and welcoming and, cracked some jokes with Waseem as we all sipped our coffees. After finishing their coffee, one of them invited us and Waseem over for a *Mansaf* dinner in the evening and left for their houses giddily.

Louis and Waseem agreed on a good location for Waseem to sit for the interview and I began setting up. I extended the tripods and fit them with the bright lights needed to illuminate the room. I clipped the small audio microphone onto Waseem's shirt collar as my brother set up his camera. Rashida positioned herself next to the camera with a list of questions she and Louis compiled the night before. Hawa went around the house asking the other family members to keep the noise down during filming. When we were all set, the camera began recording and the interview began.

## **Waseem**

Waseem was a Computer Engineer with a PhD in Syria. He was tortured in a Syrian regime prison and his leg became so badly infected it had to be amputated. In 2012, his wife carried him across the border into Jordan as he continued bleeding. He survived after receiving emergency medical treatment by Jordanian government medics. He now works as a freelance computer technician and sells baskets and other hand goods made by his daughter. It doesn't amount to much as a source of income, but it was, as he told us, better than nothing. Waseem talked about his leg; how he was thrown in prison and tortured by the regime. When he was

released to his family, he was internally bleeding from a failed kidney and his leg would probably have to be amputated. He talked about his family; where they lived in Syria and how they left when fighting and shelling started occurring in nearby towns only days after he got out of prison. He spoke highly of the Jordanian government and army. He said he was welcomed in Jordan with open arms. At one point he even said the Jordanian government "cared about his life even more than he does". He said his financial woes, namely his inability to receive bank loans and put food on the table for his family, were not the fault of the Jordanian government, but the United Nations, which he claimed were not doing enough to help the victims of the carnage in Syria. He talked about his experience at Zaa'tari camp; where he was initially living after coming to Jordan. He hated living in a tent, so he and his family made a joint decision to leave and seek accommodation in Mafraq, where there are many other Syrian refugees. He talked a bit about how he formed a basketball team of young wheelchair users, Syrian and Jordanian, as way to give back to his host community and to encourage children to realize their full potential in life. He also spoke of the Jordanian government-sanctioned separation of Syrian and Jordanian children at schools. Syrian students attended classes in the mornings and Jordanian students attended in the afternoon. It's a good thing, he said, so they don't make trouble with each other.

Waseem's account of events surrounding his distressing flight to Jordan praises the Jordanian government highly. It was hard to ascertain his true feelings about his status as a refugee because of this. This represented another one of the three main obstacles I address in this paper: that which is *political* in nature. This political obstacle to the process of interviewing refugees is particularly frustrating, as it was made clear time and time again that certain individuals might alter their stories or hold their tongue in regards to certain matters being discussed in our conversations with them on camera. Fortunately though, because he expressed

no desire to return to Syria ever again, Waseem made his opinions of the Syrian government known to us. He was not afraid to discuss the brutality of the Assad regime and the myriad ways in which they made his life unbearable. The same comfort with which Waseem was able to discuss his political views about the Syrian government did not apply to the majority of refugees we interviewed who did express a desire to return to Syria in the future.

### **Layla**

After we had finished interviewing Waseem, his daughter Layla took her seat in another room. I repositioned the lights and Hawa attached the microphone to Layla's blouse. She was a seventeen-year-old girl, but her composure was that of a confident adult woman. Layla reiterated some of her father's story; how they had been living relatively normal lives in Daraa, Syria, where the revolution began. She was eleven years old at the time and liked to play with her cousins. She recalled the day when she and her family left Daraa. They had cleaned the house before they left for her grandfather's house, thinking they would return within five days or so. She told us how she left her grandfather's house on a hot August day during the month of Ramadan, they ate a solemn *Iftar* before being picked up by a mysterious driver with already a few other passengers in his van. The driver dropped them off somewhere near the Jordanian border and instructed everyone who was wearing white to put on black clothing. Children were given sleeping pills so they wouldn't make any noise. As they walked in the dark, they had to switch off their mobile phones and take out their SIM cards and batteries to prevent being tracked. They walked for miles in a state of absolute fear.

The Jordanian soldiers at the border welcomed them when they arrived at the checkpoint, they gave them some food and provided her father with emergency medical care. She remembered how she and her siblings were traumatized; afraid when they heard the sounds of

planes flying in the air, thinking they were coming for them. Layla hated the Zaatari camp, and was glad when they eventually moved in with their uncle in Mafraq. She told us she dropped out of school four years ago after several of her classmates pushed her down a flight of stairs. She had no desire to go back to a formal classroom setting and started taking independent courses instead. She took courses in ICDL (International Computer Driving License) for a computer skills certification, as her father had recommended, as well as courses in making handcrafts, cooking, sewing, and cosmetics. She took pride in her 'flower bouquets' made of colorful socks, which people often buy for a modest price. She also spoke of the difficulties she faces as a girl and how this was particularly scary for her during their flight from Syria and in the Zaatari camp in Jordan. Rashida, teary-eyed from hearing Layla's account, thanked her and commended her on her strength in the face of adversity. Our crew reflected for a bit after Layla left the room to help her aunt make some lunch for the family. It was startling to see how just how quickly a young woman like Layla, who was only eleven years old at the time she and her family fled the war in Syria, was forced to become an adult over the course of her ordeal; she was simply robbed of her childhood.

### **Asiya**

The next and last family member we interviewed was Layla's mother, Asiya. Asiya was a serious woman with a stern look in her eye. This was the woman who carried her husband over the border into Syria as his leg descended into gangrene and his kidney continued to profusely bleed internally. He survived with her assistance, fortunately. Asiya was waiting for one of her daughters to come home with the bread so she could make some lunch. She explained to us that good-paying jobs were in short supply for Syrian refugees in Jordan without work permits. Since her husband can't work, she and one of her daughters work to pay the rent. She didn't have to

work back when she was living in Syria and used to love cooking lavish meals for guests. She expressed her interest in starting a cooking business one day in the future. One of her older daughters, who now lives away from home with her Jordanian husband, recently started working at an organization, which helps to pay the rent. The most important thing in life now, Asiya told us, is being able to pay the rent. She lamented, the landlord will force you to leave if you can't pay the rent, even if you don't eat or drink, as long as you pay the rent. She, like her husband, explained that medical care was simply not affordable. Asiya told us, "we can get sick but we can't go to the doctor, we just lie on the mattress to numb the pain, to save the rent". She badly wanted to move to a new apartment, but was having trouble finding a new place located on the ground floor of a building, a necessary prerequisite for her husband who can't easily climb stairs. Asiya invited us to stay for lunch but we politely declined as we had more interviews lined up elsewhere later in the day.

### **Lamees**

The next day, we travelled to Baqa'a camp for an interview with a single mother who lives with her 10-year-old twin sons. Baqa'a, a camp originally established in 1968 for Palestinian refugees has seen a major influx of Syrian refugees since the start of the war in Syria. Lamees was one such Syrian refugee woman. On our way to Baqa'a, just twenty kilometers north of Amman, we got lost a number of times and found ourselves asking for directions at several points. Many addresses are either hard to find or non-existent. This is a prime example of the physical obstacles in the way of accessing refugees. When we arrived at her apartment building, we were welcomed and offered the obligatory cup of coffee. The apartment was by far the nicest living arrangement of any of the Syrian refugees we had encountered so far. It was by no means large or luxurious, but we could see just how much work Lamees must have put into making her

apartment feel like a home. For the first time during my time in Jordan, I felt we were invited into an actual house of sorts. It did not feel like a home that lacked anything at all.

Lamees wore a *niqab* to cover her face for her interview as she preferred to hide her identity. She usually only wore a *hijab*, but didn't want anyone to see the video in the future and be able to recognize her. She told us that she lived in Yarmouk in Syria. She left when her house was shelled and her husband was killed. She came to Jordan in 2013 with her two twin boys, both 10 years old. She recalled that her children were traumatized by the war, and would panic whenever they heard loud noises. Lamees eventually secured a place to live and an income, working as a house cleaner, then wanted to make sure her kids were getting an education. She enrolled them in a Jordanian public school which, as we first learned from our interview with Waleed, operates on two shifts, one in the morning for Syrian children, and one in the afternoon for Jordanian children. Lamees told us that her sons struggle in their classes. They have a hard time paying attention, and some of the other kids pick on them at school.

Lamees informed us that she recently stopped working as a house cleaner because she was diagnosed with breast cancer. There was a tumor in her breast and a herniated disc in her spine. After undergoing a surgical procedure she could barely afford, she found herself becoming exhausted more easily and began looking for work that was less physically demanding. She started cooking popular family-style trays of traditional Arabic foods like *Kebbeh* from home and selling to Jordanians willing to buy her food. Lamees showed us her kitchen, which was immaculately clean at the time and explained to us how she takes hygiene very seriously. She makes her kids wash their hands when they come home and doesn't allow anyone to play in or around the kitchen. At the time we interviewed her, Lamees told us that she has continued working as a house cleaner when she has no food orders to fill. She told us "I don't want the

world to know I am a cleaner. My kids don't know that I work as a cleaner. I tell them I go to the market and they wonder why it takes me so long". Sometimes Lamees returns home with little gifts for her children to surprise them and make them happy.

The neighbors view Lamees skeptically as she is a single mother living with her kids and frequently leaves the home for hours at a time. She says they sometimes ask "Where do you go? How do you make ends meet?". She pointed out that we, as a four-person film crew coming into her apartment, would have raised more than a few eyebrows among her neighbors. Lamees says her children ask why they don't have a father who can go out and do fun things with them; especially on *Eid*, when they go out with the fathers of other children to have fun. The whole ordeal of losing her husband and becoming a refugee has strengthened her on the outside, but broken her from within; that it made her take a stance to challenge the world because she is a woman and her children need to survive. She feels like she is both a mother and a father and explains, "You are broken from within but you have to appear strong for your kids. You have to show that you are not weak so they don't learn to become weak". She feels that she sacrifices herself for her children in a country that is not hers. She informed us that she has been seeing a therapist for a while and that it is helping her to cope with her feelings, but there is always a lingering feeling of despair that she must fight or else everything she has fought for will crumble. After the interview, Rashida, who had been asking the questions to Lamees, broke down in tears and requested that she be excused from her interviewing duties for the rest of the day

## **Ramy**

The next day, we travelled to a rural location known as Al Aghwar, about a two and a half hour's drive south of Amman. We were set to meet with a man named Ramy who was the de

facto head of a collective of about 200 Syrian refugees who migrated biannually between the north and south of Jordan. Rashida had got in contact with Ramy through a connection she made on our first day in Mafraq. Although Ramy's mobile tent city was located in a desert and not technically an official camp in the eyes of the Jordanian government, he wanted to share his story with us and agreed to appear in front of the camera. His camp in Al Aghwar was hard to find and we had to call him three different times to make sure we were going the right way. The sun was starting to go down, and the long desert road was difficult to follow. Once we arrived, about an hour later than we had originally planned on getting there, there was no more sunlight. Ramy welcomed us upon our arrival and showed us to his tent. The tent was nicely furnished; the inside was neatly lined with rugs and cushions on the floor and there was even a flat screen TV secured to the tent pole, which Ramy had repaired and hooked up to a makeshift cable source. He proudly showed us his ingenuity as my brother and I brought in the camera equipment. A fluffy orange and white cat roamed around the tent as two of Ramy's young children fought over a bag of cheese puff-like snacks, both of whom wanted the honor of offering our crew something to eat.

Ramy came from Ghouta in southern Syria, in 2013, to Jordan. He had lived in Zaatari camp for the first two years before he was smuggled out to live with several of his relatives who had also fled to Jordan. Ramy built tents to live in with them and worked on getting more people out of Zaatari to live with him over the course of a year. He didn't like Zaatari, he said. There was no work, he claimed; they just give out aid which was never enough, and the living situation was humiliating for him. While in Zaatari, he along with a few others in the camp, started an organization and received funding. They started teaching children in Zaatari. He used to receive a monthly salary of 240 Dinars from an organization called "Save the Children" which was

funded by UNICEF. They conducted classes, and occasionally took kids on field trips as the program expanded. The teaching standard improved and they were eventually able to teach public school curriculum. Shortly thereafter, however, the funding stopped. This was a big shock and hurt his family, a wife and five children. "Save the Children" used to pay twenty dinars monthly to compensate each student's expenses, but now, Ramy told us, the situation has deteriorated and many children have gone back to the way they were at the beginning of the crisis, not getting any education within the camp. Instead, children are bussed out to public schools in Jordan, but it is expensive (15 dinars monthly per child), so many people don't send their kids to school as many families cannot afford this.

Now, Ramy and his collective move back and forth during the year, from Aghwar to another location which he wasn't comfortable telling us about. He has been living this way for the last four years and always has concern about the elderly getting sick or about electricity and clean water. He expressed a strong nostalgia for his life back in Syria. As he showed us pictures of his old house back in Syria on his cell phone, he lamented his children's confusion about their identity and their incomprehension of the scope of what they've been through. He told us, "I have five children. Their education opportunities are limited and opportunities for having a stable life doesn't exist. They've forgotten their village, they've forgotten that we have relatives back in Syria. If I show them pictures, they don't recognize their aunts and uncles". Back in Syria, Ramy's family never lived in a tent, they had a nice house, a garden, a nice community. They had fig and olive trees, sheep, and they used to travel as tourists. Ramy learned in 2016 from several of his relatives still living in Syria, that his old house and neighborhood is completely destroyed. Losing everything has been emotionally, physically, and mentally taxing on them.

One question determined the general tone of all interviews with Syrians; did they want to return to Syria? If they did hope to return one day, they made sure not to say anything bad about the Syrian government or president Bashar al-Assad. If they had no desire to return, they would be more inclined to open up about their political views. This sometimes made it difficult to ascertain all the details of their experience and circumstances. Ramy's interview in particular highlights this point more clearly than the rest. Ramy did wish to return to Syria in the future. Of his five children, three of them suffer from severe visual and neurological impairment. Out of the three, one is completely blind. The symptoms of the children are in line with those of people who have been affected by nerve agents such as Sarin gas. Given that he and his family are originally from an area of Syria where chemical attacks have been reported in 2013, the likelihood of them having been victims themselves is higher than normal. When we asked him about his children's medical condition, Ramy was quick to tell us that the children were simply born this way as a result of the fact that he married his cousin. Soon after, he requested to stop the interview. We did not press further but could not help but notice that he was uncomfortable with the question. It is very possible that he would not be honest about the fact that his children were the victims of a chemical attack by the Syrian government, if they indeed were. This represents a political obstacle to the process of interviewing refugees.

#### **IV. Literature Review**

Journalist and president of UNICEF Germany Maria Von Welser's 2016 book *No Refuge for Women: The Tragic Fate of Syrian Refugees* discusses the plight of Syrian refugees living in host countries in the Middle East. In her chapter covering the refugees residing in Jordan, Von Welser touches on many of the themes and obstacles I personally encountered throughout my time filming in Jordan. Many of the difficulties experienced by Syrian refugees in Jordan can be

found in Von Welser's account of a 32-year-old Syrian refugee woman named Asma. Von Welser writes about the squalid conditions in which refugees, particularly those belonging to the eighty percent which reside outside of organized refugee camps, often live. Asma "lives with her five children in a one-room apartment in the Amman suburb of Jabal Faisal. Her rent is 100 dinar a month, about \$130. In winter the roof leaks, and at night it is freezing cold - she has no money to pay for heating. Wood is expensive, and on top of this the chimney doesn't draw, so thick smoke fills the room" (Von Welser, 2016, p. 138). The Amman suburb of Jabal Faisal, much like the Baqa'a camp in which Lamees lives, was originally established as source of housing for Palestinian refugees from earlier decades. In this way, people like Asma and Lamees live in a multi-tiered refugee society; relatively recently displaced Syrians on top of older, more established communities of displaced Palestinians.

Von Welser addresses the challenges faced by families of Syrian refugees like Asma. Asma's oldest son, Faisal, has a job that pays the equivalent of some U.S. \$50 a month. But his work is very risky, writes Von Welser,

As refugees are not allowed to work in Jordan without permits. If he is discovered he will be deported, back to the war in Syria... One of the reasons for the Jordanians' defensive stance is the fear that Syrians will take their jobs - first, because they work for less money, and second (and it has long been common knowledge), because the Syrians work considerably harder and don't enter into long discussions about extra vacation time. So Syrians have a realistic chance of finding work in Jordan, but more so if they have a work permit, which would cost Asma and the older children over \$500 a year - an unaffordable sum for the young woman. (Von Welser, 2016, p. 139)

Like hundreds of thousands of other Syrian refugee families in Jordan, Asma's relies on aid from NGOs such as food vouchers from the World Food Program. But the WFP was forced to halve its support to about 50 cents per day in the summer of 2015 when donor contributions fell short (Von Welser, 2016, p. 139). This sort of story was all too common in the testimonies of the

refugees I encountered. Refugees are often stuck in such vicious circles: refugees must find additional forms of employment as a result of the lack of sustainable income/ aid, but work permits are expensive and this leads to refugees finding risky work.

In order to document the plight of Syrian refugees in Jordan in 2014, American filmmakers Chris Temple and Zach Ingrasci lived for one month in the Zaatari camp, Jordan's largest refugee camp to film *Salam Neighbor* (2016). Temple and Ingrasci spent their time filming Syrians in the camp going about their daily lives and interviewing anyone willing to talk about their experiences. Chris and Zach initially were received with skepticism. Upon first arriving the camp, people asked what they were doing there. Had they come to film people without their permission? Eventually people began trusting them much in the same way the people I and my film crew spoke with. There are many similarities between the experiences of Temple and Ingrasci in their filming process, and my own experience filming in Jordan. In the first half of their film, Temple and Ingrasci speak with a young Syrian refugee man named Ismail. Ismail recalls when he left Syria after his town was shelled by mortar fire. Much like the testimony given to us by Layla in Mafraq, Ismail recalls how he was dropped off near the Jordanian border at night and the children in the van were given sleeping pills so as not to make any noise.

Halfway through the film, a single mother living in Mafraq (not in a refugee camp) named Ghossoon is introduced. Ghossoon is the head of her household, much like Lamees whom I mentioned earlier. Ghossoon was a nurse in Syria but at the time of filming she was having trouble obtaining an official work permit and became a recipient of government aid. The aid she receives is barely enough to make ends meet so she makes and sells handcrafts as well.

The pair of filmmakers befriends a boy named Raouf early on during their stay in the camp. At one point in the film, Raouf expresses his interest in becoming a doctor one day. Although currently not in school, Raouf states that he is willing to go through all the arduous years of education necessary to achieve his dream of becoming a doctor. Inspired by the boy's ambition, Temple and Ingrasci eventually convince the initially reluctant Raouf to walk over with them to the nearby camp-sponsored school and enroll in classes. The American filmmakers, however, were not prepared for what followed after their arrival inside the schoolyard. Raouf becomes emotional and begins crying, crouching beside the schoolyard gate. They leave the school and talk to Raouf's father, who informs them that when Raouf was back in school in Syria, his school building was bombed. Raouf's reluctance to go to school, and reaction upon arriving at the one in the camp, was rooted in a traumatic experience of which Temple and Ingrasci were completely unaware. After their discussion with Raouf's father is over, Temple hides behind a nearby tent and breaks down emotionally, asking Ingrasci not to film him. This is another difficulty to be found in the experience of documenting and filming refugee populations. On more than one occasion, I am not shy to admit, I found myself emotionally overwhelmed by the circumstances of the subjects we were interviewing.

Towards the end of the film, an image of the Save the Children school, the school mentioned by Ramy in his interview, appears on screen. The footage included in Temple and Ingrasci's film was taken in 2014, when Save the Children was still being funded. The funding, as Ramy had mentioned in his interview, would stop within a year from the time *Salam Neighbor* was shot.

Another documentary film which stands out to me in my attempt to understand is *After Spring* (2016) directed by documentary filmmakers Steph Ching and Ellen Martinez. *After*

*Spring* touches on several matters I encountered during my own experience in Jordan such as the issue of the language barrier. Neither Ching nor Martinez are Arabic -speakers and furthermore, in their coverage of a Taekwondo class taught by a South Korean instructor in the Zaatari camp, they encountered a particular challenge in the way of translating not only Arabic, but Korean as well. Most importantly, the film does much in the way of addressing the eighty percent of Syrian refugees living in Jordan who do not reside in camps. The film presents this overwhelming majority living in urban settings throughout Jordan as an "invisible population". Ching and Martinez cover the difficulties in accessing this population and how because of this obstacle in the way of access, they are much harder to help.

By the end of the film, the audience is made aware of the significance of the film's title "After Spring". One of the Syrian refugees named Mohamed, whose family is closely followed in the film, plans on going back to Syria in the Summer (after the Spring). His wife is pregnant and the family desires to return to Syria after the birth of their child. Ultimately, Mohamed ends up staying in Zaatari camp in Jordan after his son is born instead of going back to Syria. The case of Mohamed is also part of a larger juxtaposition between his experience and that of another man named Abu Ibrahim, who is focused on in the film. In viewing the film, the audience can observe that Mohamed, who is interested in returning to Syria, does not hold a single criticism against the Syrian government. Abu Ibrahim, on the other hand, says he will never return to Syria. Abu Ibrahim speaks openly and candidly about his involvement in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which is an armed rebel group which fights in opposition to the Syrian government forces. Abu Ibrahim expresses that he will only return to Syria once the Assad regime falls. This juxtaposition relates directly to my own experience hearing the testimonies of Syrian refugees in Jordan. As I have mentioned earlier on, the main deciding factor in whether or not an individual speaks openly

about their experience in becoming a refugee, is whether or not the individual in question expresses a desire, or lack thereof, of returning to Syria.

In an article published in the *Jordan Times*, Middle East political analyst Fares Braizat suggests that Jordan and the international community "should embrace having to deal with over 50 percent of Syrian refugees in Jordan who will not go back" (Braizat, 2018). A recent survey conducted by NAMA, an Amman-based Strategic Intelligence Solutions firm (About Us, NAMA website) in November 2018 covering 1,306 Jordanians and 600 Syrian refugees found that 33 percent of Syrian refugees said that they will never go back and 24 per cent said they probably will not go back (Braizat, 2018). Instability in Syria is the major factor determining willingness to return to Syria. According to the NAMA findings, only 14 percent of Syrians express a strong desire to go back to Syria. As far as US and European interests are concerned, there is a tendency to link stabilization and reconstruction of Syria to a political process in Syria, or in other words, 'regime change'. Fares argues that international policymakers must get past many of their political holdups in dealing with the Syrian government in order to lessen the refugee burden on their countries as well as poorer neighboring countries of Syria.

Despite a large percentage of Syrian refugees living in Jordan being afraid to return to a government-controlled Syria, this body of evidence suggests that priority should be given to the security, stability, and reconstruction of Syria to build stronger pull factors to encourage refugees to return to Syria from countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Simply put, international media places too much focus on the geopolitics of the situation in its coverage of refugees as ordinary people suffer from largely non- geopolitical reasons.

*Huffington Post* contributor Magda Abu-Fadil covers issues related to the emotional toll on journalists who report on refugees as well as the nature of the reporting itself in a conversation with Rula Amin, the Senior Communications Advisor at the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Amin argues that since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict and influx of millions of refugees into neighboring countries, journalists' coverage has been limited to certain angles and manipulated to serve political ends and agendas. Furthermore, in that context, "media coverage misses out on the crucial important aspect of the needs of refugees, which are their basic rights, rights for asylum, and the right to pursue their lives in dignity with full protection," (Abu-Fadil, 2017). Often, media and other reporting on the plight of Syrian refugees has focused too heavily on the politics involved. What is forgotten is a more human, and more 'grey', area of understanding which must be acknowledged. The acute needs of refugees don't depend on politics, they are rather rooted in societal issues such as assimilation and acceptance, as well as immediate basic needs.

So why is this not the case for mainstream International media? What makes it so challenging for journalists to paint an objective picture? This dynamic can, in part, be explained by a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne Effect.

It has been made clear through ethnographic research and scholarly literature since the twentieth century that the act of observation changes the nature of that which is being observed. At play throughout our time filming the interviews, was a phenomenon known as the observer effect, or Hawthorne Effect. Originally named for the observations made of workers' behavior at the General Electric plant in Hawthorne, Illinois, the Hawthorne Effect can be defined as "Any effect on the behavior of individuals and groups due to knowing that they are under observation" (Porta and Last, 2018, "Hawthorne effect." In *A Dictionary of Public Health*. : Oxford University

Press). In essentially every life situation, be it scientific experimentation, or our interactions with friends and family, we attempt to note all circumstances and outcomes with some degree of care, so that we can come to some firm conclusions about causes and effects. "Sometimes, however, despite all the care we take to allow for variables in the situation and to ensure that confounding does not take place, unaccountable outcomes do occur. Researchers are clearly very interested in such events and seek to find plausible explanations for them. One such explanation is the Hawthorne Effect." (Merrett, 2006, p. 143).

In 1949, in his book *Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, Australian sociologist Elton Mayo expanded the discourse about the Hawthorne effect in by conducting a series of interviews with workers at industrial plants in an effort to see how they would respond in an environment where they were aware of their being observed. From 1928 to 1930, Mayo and his partner Fritz Roethlisberger oversaw the process of conducting more than 21,000 interviews and trained researchers in interviewing practices. Mayo's methodology shifted from asking direct questions, to what is known as nondirected interviewing; questions that allowed the factory employees to speak more freely and openly about their concerns such as their families. What Mayo found was that providing a channel for free expression changed the interviewee's perception of being observed into one of being listened to (Mayo, 1949). And as the Hawthorne Studies research report noted, the interview came to be "defined as a conversation in which the employee is encouraged to express himself freely upon any topic of his own choosing." (Harvard Business School Baker Library: Hawthorne Studies Collection, 1932). So how does the Hawthorne effect relate to the process of documentary film?

What does it mean to document? What really is documentary film? John Grierson, often referred to as the father of British documentary film, was a Scottish documentary filmmaker who

first coined the term 'documentary' in his 1926 review of the American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's films (Curthoys & Lake, 2004, p. 151). Flaherty worked in a time when there was no distinction between fiction and documentary films and this can be seen most notably in his two best-known works, *Moana* and *Nanook of the North*. Both films are concerned with the lifestyles of indigenous peoples, *Moana* focuses on the Samoans on the Island of Savai'i and *Nanook of the North* looks at the Inuk people of northern Quebec, Canada, and the result is what has come to be referred to as "docufiction" (Mayeshwari, 2014). Grierson sought to examine these films and draw a distinction between fiction and what he considered true realist documentary film.

In his 1932 essay *First Principles of Documentary*, Grierson explores the ethical issues that the documentary film genre raises. He argues that the principles of documentary are that cinema's potential for observing life could be exploited in a new art form; that the "original" actor and "original" scene are better guides than their fiction counterparts to interpreting the modern world; and that materials "thus taken from the raw" can be more real than the acted article. "The use of natural material has been regarded as a vital distinction" (Grierson, 1932, p. 453). This however, as Grierson argues, means that newsreel and magazine items, as well as educational and scientific films, all fall under the category of documentary. This should not be the case, according to Grierson. Rather, documentary film should be a more specific genre. What makes documentary compelling is that,

The original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world. They give cinema a greater fund of material. They give it power over a million and one images. They give it power of interpretation over more complex and astonishing happenings in the real world than the studio mind can conjure up or the studio mechanic recreate. We believe that the materials and the stories thus taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophic sense) than the acted article (Grierson, 1932, pp. 454-455).

Grierson admires this dynamic as a certain sense of social responsibility which makes realist documentary a troubled and difficult art (Grierson, 1932, p. 458). As elusive as true objectivity is, 'native' actors and scenes provide the basis for a more nuanced picture of a time and place. Grierson's distinction between his definition of documentary and that of newsreels exposes news as another form of conventional storytelling on par with works of fiction. In contrast, according to Grierson, true documentary is an entirely different mode of storytelling; one which, in his time, had not been defined or adequately experimented with.

## V. Analysis

According to Grierson, Robert Flaherty's early approach to documentary, although flawed in many ways, illustrated the basic principles of that which we now consider to be a good documentary. "Flaherty digs himself in for a year, or two maybe. He lives with his people till the story is told "out of himself"... you photograph the natural life but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it." (Grierson, 1932, p. 456). It is for precisely this reason that *Salam Neighbor* is so compelling as a work of documentary film. Temple and Ingrasci embedded themselves in the same environment of their subjects for a whole month. It is only through such an approach as this that a documentarian can best understand, or get as close to understanding as possible.

The ASPIRE organization's efforts can be viewed as a solution to many of the problems which arise due social obstacles. The hope is that by acknowledging the beneficial nature of participating in a research project like ASPIRE's, one can see that increased openness about topics typically regarded as taboo, such as women's reproductive health, leads to an improvement in the quality of life for the whole family. Although a comprehensive study has yet to be

conducted by the ASPIRE organization suggesting that conversations within refugee homes are changing in regards to this topic, attitudes which are commonplace now may very well change over time and lead to increased openness about taboo topics.

In regards to the vicious financial cycle, mentioned in my discussion of Maria Von Welser's book above, the impact this dynamic has on refugee children, particularly those old enough to work in one way or another, is devastating. One of the things we noticed as a common theme among the individuals we interviewed was the repeatedly mentioned fact that, in Jordan, Syrian refugee children attend Jordanian schools in a shift separate from Jordanian children. The dynamic of Syrian children going to school in the morning means that they are unable to help their families with much needed chores. This proves to be an inconvenience for Syrian families who struggle to make ends meet financially. Many Syrian families end up not enrolling their children in school, so that they can help around the house or work instead. This has a negative impact on the development of the child and leads to what the UNHCR refers to as a "lost generation" (United Nations, 2014).

## **VI. Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, I have demonstrated the obstacles, or difficulties, inherent in the process of filming Syrian refugee populations in Jordan. The political, social, and physical obstacles in the way of objectivity exist and provide a challenge to painting a clear and nuanced picture through the medium of film. The difficulties I personally encountered reflect a larger dynamic which exists in the portrayals of Syrian refugees in international media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis. All testimonies of refugees become narratives which, as is so often the case in journalistic representations of Syrian refugees, become political and serve to further advance varied agendas. The testimonies I collected, and the way in which Louis and I plan to present

them in the form of a film intended for a broad audience, attempt to counter such pre-existing representations.

Although physical obstacles are ever present, and little can be done in regards to reducing the impact of the political obstacles, the social obstacles are subject to change. Through my experience with the ASPIRE organization, a common theme emerges among many of the researchers involved in the data collection process: that as refugee families begin to see the improved quality of life provided by their mother's/wife's participation in reproductive health-oriented research efforts (such as that of ASPIRE), the quality of life improves for the whole family. Further studies should be conducted examining the correlation between surveying women about topics pertaining to social issues, such as reproductive health or other topics typically considered taboo, and changed attitudes in refugee households. It is my hope that, in the future, the ASPIRE organization will conduct such studies in order to clearly document this dynamic. As the benefits of transparency come to be regarded with more value, attitudes surrounding transparency in regards to sensitive topics change.

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