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Stories of Syrian Refugees from Za'atari- The Second Largest Refugee Camp in the World: A Review of Salam Neighbor

Christine A. Wernet
University of South Carolina - Aiken, christinew@usca.edu

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Stories of Syrian Refugees from Za'atari- The Second Largest Refugee Camp in the World

A Review of *Salam Neighbor*

Film Information

Title: *Salam Neighbor*

Year: 2015

Length: 75 minutes

Language/Subtitles: English/Arabic with English subtitles

Producers: Mohab Khattab and Salam Darwaza

Directors: Zach Ingrasci and Chris Temple

Review

Salam Neighbor is a moving documentary which explores the human rights issues plaguing Syrian refugees. Two young American film makers, Zach Ingrasci and Chris Temple (who have also directed the acclaimed film *Living on One Dollar*), immerse themselves in Za'atari, the second largest refugee camp in the world, located just across the Syrian border in Jordan which is home to over 85,000 refugees. The total number of Syrian refugees in Jordan is estimated to be more than 600,000 which is approximately 7% of Jordan's population. The directors provide the viewer with an inside understanding of how refugee camps work and they humanize Muslim refugees.

Zach and Chris are warmly welcomed into the camp and they are befriended by refugees like Ismail, Raouf, and Ghoussoon. The despair and vulnerability of these individuals who have chosen peace over war is palpable. Ismail was one of the first refugees to enter the camp in 2012. He, like so many after him, fled in the cover of darkness and made the difficult trek across the rocky dessert in silence and fear of being shot and killed. Before the war, Ismail was studying in Damascus to be a French teacher. Like others in the camp, he has nothing to do. There is no work in the camp and refugees cannot get visas to work in Jordan because of the high unemployment rate.

Raouf is a 10-year-old refugee in the camp who was in third grade when he left Syria. This bright lovable little boy, who wants to be a doctor and who loved school in Syria, does not want to go back to school even after two years in the camp. An unsuccessful attempt to try to coax Raouf to school led Zach and Chris to find out that Raouf is unable to bring himself to go to school because of past trauma. Raouf's school in Syria was bombed while he was in attendance. Raouf is not alone in this struggle; while education is provided in the camps, it is estimated that only half of all refugee children attend school. This tragic loss of potential makes it even harder for the people in the camps to have hope of rebuilding their homeland one day.

Beyond being paralyzed by his memories of bombs, Raouf is also lonely. In the film, he drew a picture that he titled, *Lonely Man*. When asked why the man was lonely he said the man's mother and brothers and sisters had all died. Raouf reported this was the story of everyone that he knew. Refugees have not only lost family members, but they lost their livelihood, their homes, and their identity.

Ghoussoon, like 80% of the refugees in Jordan, lives outside of the camps in urban areas. Ghoussoon is a single mother of three young children who made her way to Jordan before the refugee camps were set up. Approximately one out of four refugee households are headed by women. In Syria, Ghoussoon was a nurse, but she does not have access to reliable paid work in Jordan. She received a small allowance to cover her basic needs from aid organizations but that was not enough, so she started making hair clips to sell to women to supplement her income. Her children attend school with other Syrian refugees at the local schools in the evening, after the Jordanian children go home.

When her allowance ran out it became difficult to make ends meet, and Ghoussoon applied for asylum in the United States. At the time of filming, four and a half years into the conflict, the United States had only taken in 1,883 refugees. Given the restrictions the United States government has on accepting refugees, it is unlikely that she will ever be granted asylum.

This film asks important questions about human rights issues pertaining to refugees. The average refugee spends seventeen years of their life in a refugee camp that is designed to be a short-term solution, not a long-term residence. The film makers set out to create a deeper understanding about refugees and to break the cycle of distrust and violence between Westerners and Muslims.

Some might argue that a weakness of the film is that the story is told by two white, American men, thus further subjugating Muslim refugees. This weakness is also a strength, in that it helps Western audiences identify with and understand a population that has been negatively stereotyped by many elements of Western society. This important film deserves the attention of policy makers, students, and laypeople alike as it provides invaluable insight into the crisis and human rights violations of refugees.